

**“The Salitter drying from the earth”: Apocalypse in  
the novels of Cormac McCarthy**

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## Abstract

In this thesis, I analyse four novels by Cormac McCarthy through the lens of Apocalypse theory. Looking at his later, south-western, novels *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, I examine to what extent they respond to biblical and secular apocalyptic ideologies and narrative tropes. Particular attention is paid to the distinction between biblical apocalypse and secular, or nihilistic, apocalypse. The former draws its framework from the Book of Revelation, and entails a war between Heaven and Hell, the rule of the Anti-Christ and God's final judgement. Although cataclysmic, a biblical apocalypse also promises worldly renewal through the descent of New Jerusalem. Thus, the end of the world was a desirable, rather than dreaded, event. However, as the world moved into the twentieth century, and we saw modernity give birth to weapons of global destruction, apocalyptic attitudes became pessimistic. The belief that God would save the world from corruption quickly gave way to an entropic end, in which human civilisation will simply collapse into nothingness.

I consider McCarthy's south-west fiction within these opposing apocalyptic ideas, and demonstrate how the four novels build a line of history that begins with *Blood Meridian's* Manifest Destiny and ends with *The Road's* nuclear bomb. I argue that McCarthy explores both biblical and nihilistic apocalyptic modes before combining them in *The Road*, which I argue offers a new apocalyptic mode: renewal and salvation without God. Within this context, I argue against common interpretations of McCarthy as a completely nihilistic writer with no vested anthropological concerns. Through these four novels, I instead suggest he negotiates between biblical and nihilistic apocalyptic modes before coming to the conclusion, in *The Road*, that hope exists.

## Introduction

“It is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I don't believe knowing can save us.”

(Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 239)

The Dueña Alfonsa of Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* claims that “[w]hat is constant in history is greed and foolishness and a love of blood and this is a thing that even God – who knows all that can be known – seems powerless to change” (241). This bleak interpretation of history ostensibly aligns itself with a nihilistic dialectic that characterises much of McCarthy's fiction. Yet instead of promoting a cycle of perpetuating violence, as implied in the epigraph, the novels studied in this thesis move towards an end, which contains either the promise of renewal or a worldly collapse into unredeemable chaos. Nevertheless, I would argue that there is something intrinsically apocalyptic about McCarthy's fiction, and it is from this viewpoint that this thesis will investigate his work. Focussing on the novels *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men* and *The Road*, I will consider how apocalyptic thought, ideology and theory inform and contextualize these narratives. Specifically, I will look at how each novel responds to two different apocalyptic ideologies, and how they build in chronological sequence to create an interpretation of history that appears to end with *The Road*. To situate my argument, I will first provide an overview of apocalyptic thought as traditionally expressed in fiction. Additionally, as these chosen novels predominately take place in the American south-west, I will examine how they draw inspiration from the defining tropes of the western genre, the history of Manifest Destiny, the

role of the cowboy, and the closing of the frontier. I will unify these approaches to McCarthy's fiction by identifying parallels between apocalyptic ideology and frontier theory.

### ***1. Apocalypse***

History in apocalyptic thought is teleological rather than cyclical, the prevailing idea being that time moves linearly towards an end that will make sense of all that has come before it. While the idea of history bereft of a final destination might be perfectly logical, Malcolm Bull argues that "infinite duration is difficult to conceive, and the notion of eternal aimlessness repugnant to the moral imagination" (1). Thus, the popularity of apocalypse to the narrative imagination comes from an intrinsic need for completion. Lois Parkinson Zamora reiterates this by suggesting stories or prophecies of apocalypse "symbolically satisfy the desire of the apocalypticist and his audience for control over the otherwise intractable movement and meaning of history" (13). Against the satisfaction of such narrative modes, the apocalyptic mind addresses the dissatisfaction of chaos. The strength of apocalyptic thought is apparent by its resilience in the face of history's attempts to negate it. Since apocalypse is yet to come into being, narratives concerning the end always take the form of prophecy. From the early teachings of Zoroaster,<sup>1</sup> to The Book of Revelation, the imminence of the end of the world has always occupied the minds of the people. Even today, with the anxieties surrounding global warming and the teetering economy, the complete destruction of our current world order seems ominously looming. Even though the evident historical continuity disconfirms all previous prophecies of the apocalypse, the apocalyptic mindset still endures. As Frank Kermode argues, "[a]pocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited ... It

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<sup>1</sup> See Norman Cohn's article "How Time Acquired a Consummation."

can also absorb changing interests, rival apocalypses, such as the Sibylline writings. It is a patient of change and historiographical sophistications” (8).

Much of the developed western world’s apocalyptic imagination draws from The Book of Revelation, which prophesises the earthly reign of Satan, the Second Coming of Christ, Satan’s return, the Last Judgement and the descent of New Jerusalem from heaven. In such traditions, the overthrow of the current world order is anticipated rather than feared. While Armageddon is a cataclysmic war between good and evil, it is also a response to an earthly crisis in need of divine rescue and retribution; anticipating the judgement of Christ to separate the saved from the wicked. This is “the discourse of religious fundamentalists who see divine design and judgement as that which will bring on the end of the world and provide a heavenly home for an elect group” (Quinby xv). Thus, the apocalypticist, in his description of the disasters that will visit the earth conveys “the power of God’s retributive justice [and also] less intentionally but no less clearly, the desperate longing of the narrator for vengeance on his oppressors” (Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* 11). The promise of renewal, which is a defining characteristic of this biblical apocalypse, inspires a longing for the end of days, as it will express “achieved historical desire” (Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* 16).

However, the theological is not the only mode of apocalyptic thought. The growth of modern society and technology has invited secular prophecies of our imminent doom. Whether it is the threat of nuclear disaster during the cold war, or the threat of climate change today, apocalyptic thought bereft of divine intervention proliferates the discourse surrounding the end of the world. This secular mode of apocalyptic ideology is related to, but not necessarily the same as, what Lee Quinby terms an ironic apocalypse. Quinby describes this mode of apocalypse as history “moving towards entropic inertia ... This is the dystopian view that history has exhausted itself. The irony is that we live on beyond morality or meaning” (xvi). Unlike a theological apocalypse, where God will revitalize a corrupt world, this

nihilistic secular attitude denies the potential for renewal or redemption. Zamora regards this mode of apocalyptic ideology as common among postmodern authors such as Thomas Pynchon, who react against the “anthropomorphism of traditional apocalypse” in favour of “the black mechanism of a purely physical world that is irreversibly running out of energy” (52). She suggests that the process of entropy functions as an appropriate metaphor for articulating this kind of apocalyptic mode:

The law of entropy requires that the total amount of entropy in the system increase. At the end of the entropic process, heat energy will be non-transferable because everything will contain an equal quantity of energy. This equilibrium, which represents the maximum molecular disorder, the greatest molecular homogeneity, is called heat death. (*Writing the Apocalypse* 54)

The utilization of entropy denies retributive justice on the wicked; instead humankind can only wait for an entropic vision that “admits no possibility that time may prove redemptive or regenerative” (Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* 55). Post-apocalyptic fiction often captures such nihilistic attitudes, generally employing them in cautionary tales of technological hubris, or to articulate the anxieties surrounding modernity. Because both the ironic apocalypse and entropic apocalypse, in their rejection of any form of redemption, operate in similar ways, my use of the phrase ‘nihilistic apocalypse’ encapsulates both definitions.

## ***2. Manifest Destiny***

Both biblical and nihilistic apocalyptic modes of thought inform much of the contemporary discourse surrounding the end of the world and respond to historical events in ways that elucidate the anxieties, hopes and fears of the people during that time. In relaying the history



of the American west, I indicate how the ideological factors inherent in the frontier share affinities with apocalyptic thought. In particular, I demonstrate how the changes in the frontier reflect changes in apocalyptic thought from divine to nihilistic will be of interest.

For early Puritans, America became the potential site of a re-created Eden. David Mogen sees the frontier, in particular, as a space for early English arrivals to transform into a “Garden of the Lord” (95). However, he notes that the frontier was also associated with fear and trepidation; its demonic wilderness inspiring narratives of captivity and violence. This led to the consequent development of a literary Gothicism particular to America. Leo Marx explains how this perception of the wilderness as violent and hostile worked to inspire agency in Puritan settlers:

To describe America as a hideous wilderness ... is to envisage it as another field for the exercise of power. This violent image expresses a need to mobilize energy, postpone immediate pleasures, and rehearse the perils and purposes of the community ... survival in a howling desert demands action, the unceasing manipulation and mastery of the forces of nature, including, of course, human nature. (43)

While the country’s prelapsarian state was a source of anxiety, it also allowed early settlers to transform and interpret the landscape along the lines of apocalyptic theology. As David Robson argues, “apocalyptic space is always textual, but never more so than in the American script. For Puritan settlers, historical space was textualized because the experience of the New World had been typologically prefigured in the Bible” (62). Zamora advances this argument by suggesting that “the earliest Puritan texts attest to constant attempts to unite apocalyptic theology and American history: The New World is directly associated with the culmination of history” (9). Ultimately, what the New World offered was a place where settlers could enact

the apocalyptic narrative. However, the inability of life in America to offer the fulfilment of renewal or redemption forced the reinterpretation of when and where Armageddon would occur. "If New England failed to resolve into the Promised Land, 'some other place' would be found, and the Puritan eschatological hopes would reconstitute themselves as America expanded across the continent" (Robson 62). Clearly the impulse to achieve such a resolution underpins the rationale for Manifest Destiny: the westward migration of English colonials in a divine mission to transform the New World.

Although Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* depicts the mission of Manifest Destiny as a holocaust visited upon the country's indigenous inhabitants, traditionally it functions, in the American imagination, as an origin myth of national identity. Emerging from this romantic genesis is the cowboy; the mythologized archetype of rugged, American masculinity. His defining characteristic is his love of freedom; the unfenced expanse of the western plains is his natural habitat: "Alone in nature, the Western character can extend his being as far as his desire reaches, and the wilderness becomes a field of metaphors for his rich and ever-regenerative self" (Lawlor 16). Mark Busby further adds that, in the wilderness, the cowboy "can test themselves against nature without the demands for social responsibility and compromise inherent in being part of a community" (229). Yet life on the frontier could only remain a reality for so long. When Frederick Jackson Turner announced the disappearance of the frontier in 1893, he announced, essentially, the end of American expansionism. His seminal essay *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* offered a romanticised retelling of Manifest Destiny, arguing that the frontier shaped American character and culture. He proposed that arrival on the shores of the New World forced the English colonial to strip his "garments of civilization" and array himself in "the hunting shirt and the moccasin" (33). Thus liberated from the skin of European culture and history, the colonist was able to re-make himself in order to master the malevolent and untamed west. "Little by little he transforms the

wilderness ... But the outcome is not the old Europe ... here is a new product that is American” (33 - 34).

Naturalist writers challenged this romantic vision of the west in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, arguing that the frontier is a “dated and gridlike part of the continental body whose essence is limited to its physical and economic proportions” (Lawlor 58). Harold P. Simonson sees the closing of the west as “the metaphor for American tragedy [and] this tragedy, when accepted, destroyed illusions fostered on the open frontier and impelled the nation to come of age.” Simonson describes this coming of age as the recognition of limitation as a “fundamental fact of life” (5). In other words, the regenerative power and cultural fashioning of the west that Turner spoke of were highly romanticised: “Coming of age means awakening to the tragic realities that nations, like men, are only mortal; that truth comes chiefly through ambiguity and paradox; and that the old inheritance of pride still carries its inexorable consequences” (Simonson 6).

This shift from a romantic reading of the frontier towards a naturalistic one emphasised the economic and scientific advantages of the landscape. Lawlor writes that

[Turner’s frontier thesis] gained currency amid the accumulating influence of literary naturalism ... Naturalist space generally closes in on human figures rather than liberating them ... The claustrophobic limits of space stand in what appears to be direct opposition to the open horizons and inspiring vistas of the Western frontier. (43 - 44)

In this reinterpretation of the frontier, spurred by the rapid development of modernity, an apocalyptic impulse is apparent. However, this kind of apocalypticism is different from the one Puritan settlers conceived when arriving at the New World. The closing of the west during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century is articulated in terms of a frontier rapidly changing into

something decidedly colder and more malevolent. Thus, there are affinities with nihilistic attitudes of apocalypse as discussed above, as the cowboy's disappearance from the landscape indicates a disappearance of old world values in the face of modernity's proliferation. This is best exemplified by the literal fencing off of the west. Apocalyptic nihilism becomes more prominent with the rise of modernity, the development of science and technology, and global conflicts during the twentieth century. This change in apocalyptic thought over the history of the frontier reflects the line of history depicted in McCarthy's four novels.

### ***3. Overview of Chapters***

This thesis analyzes four of McCarthy's novels in the context of both apocalyptic theory and the history and mythology of the American west. The novels chosen make up the latter half of the author's literary canon. What differentiates this period of McCarthy's work from his earlier fiction is the choice of setting. Taking place in an Appalachian locale, McCarthy's early novels are drenched in Southern tradition; there is, in particular, an occupation with Gothicism and the grotesque – traditions *Blood Meridian* continues, but which are less apparent in his Border Trilogy. Whether it is the murder of a baby born from an incestuous relationship, or the portrayal of a killer engaging in necrophilia, McCarthy's Appalachian fiction saw him defined as an author of the macabre. Yet looking beyond the violence and grotesquery, Rick Wallach sees in the author's early novels a preoccupation with "nostalgia for a receding paradise organically associated with lived youth and innocence" (xv). John M. Grammer understands this nostalgia as a traditional characteristic of fiction particular to the American South: "McCarthy wants to question the old southern dream of escape from history" (29). His novels investigate the southern impulse to "portray itself as a region somehow outside of time and change, a permanent refuge in a chaotic world" (Grammer 29). Although we might think we see something similar functioning in his Border Fiction, Wallach

suggests McCarthy's western characters long instead for "a vanished pioneer lifestyle once galvanized by the individualism of cowboy ethos" (xv). Despite this, there continues in the author's southern and western fiction a resistance against the course of history. The movement of history towards the end is a significant component of apocalyptic thought, and the resistance of it in McCarthy's fiction elucidates much of the author's ideologies and philosophy.

Although *Blood Meridian* marked his first venture into writing about the American west, McCarthy did not attain commercial success, or large critical recognition, until the publication of *All the Pretty Horses* in 1992. The latter novel, which is the first part of his Border Trilogy, removes itself from the Gothicism and morbid violence that defined much of the author's earlier fiction. It provides instead a romantic representation of the American West, which, Edwin T. Arnold argues, "will ... cause further reassessment of the writer's reputation as a nihilist. [*All the Pretty Horses*] is a book about the importance of choices and responsibility. It is a book about honor courage and love" ("Naming, Knowing and Nothingness" 63). The novel's subdued tone, heroic protagonist, and traditional plot have invited similar interpretations from other critics. But underlying McCarthy's elegiac narrative of a cowboy's search for identity is a tale of violence and failure. The protagonist, John Grady, through his inability to construct for himself an authentic life beyond the borders of modernity reveals how the days of the frontier are diminishing. This apocalyptic mood does not suggest the potential for renewal, rather it links the novel back to McCarthy's southern works in which his fictional worlds are drowned in nihilistic philosophy. *No Country for Old Men* further reinforces this in its depiction of a world dying from ferocious apocalyptic violence. Conversely, and perhaps ironically, both *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* offer the possibility of transcending their apocalyptic settings. Despite their emphasis on violence, and depictions of landscapes deprived of social order, these two novels invite the potential for the

re-shaping of their current world order. Although it would be difficult to argue that *Blood Meridian* and *The Road* encapsulate all the ideals of a biblical apocalypse, they do reject interpretations of nihilism through offering fleeting glimpses of hope.

One of the early McCarthy scholars, Vereen M. Bell, proclaims that the author's fictions are "as innocent of theme and of ethical reference as they are of plot" (31). He purports that McCarthy is not concerned with the machinations of a moral universe: "[e]thical categories do not rule in this environment, or even pertain: moral considerations seem not to affect outcomes; action and event seem determined wholly by capricious and incomprehensible fates" (31 – 32). In direct response to this, Edwin T. Arnold argues that

McCarthy's characters are clearly motivated by those emotions we all share – love, loneliness, guilt, shame, hope, despair; the narratives are driven by distinct thematic concerns and move at least *in the direction of* some form of resolution; and there is in each novel a moral gauge by which we, the readers, are able to judge the failure or limited successes of McCarthy's characters. ("Naming, Knowing and Nothingness" 44)

For Arnold, "to categorize McCarthy as an unusually talented purveyor of nihilistic Southern Gothic horror [misses] the essential religiosity at the core of his writing" ("Blood and Grace" 12). These two opposing approaches to the author's fiction inform much of the criticism surrounding his work. Barclay Owens suggests "Arnold's extreme faith in McCarthy as a creator of moral parables seems far-fetched and overstated" (12). Leo Daugherty, another believer in the existence of morality in McCarthy's work, gives *Blood Meridian* a Gnostic reading and argues that the kid has "the spark of the divine" (163), which suggests the possibility of hope in an otherwise hopeless world. By reading McCarthy's fiction within an apocalyptic framework, I intend to determine to what extent the author rejects the possibility

of morality or redemption for his characters. This will be achieved by looking at how each novel responds individually to either a biblical or a nihilistic apocalyptic reading, and how the novels build on from each other in order to create a history of the frontier that ends with both a nuclear catastrophe and the survival of hope.

Chapter one focuses on *Blood Meridian* and how its desert setting operates as an apocalyptic space. While it is set during the early years of westward migration, the novel's landscape functions almost as a post-apocalyptic locale: corpses of both animals and humans litter the desert; there is no sense of social or moral order except for the rule of war. The frontier is dominated by the demonic and supernatural Judge Holden, under whose aegis the mission of Manifest Destiny becomes nothing more than an orgy of violence and death. Thus, *Blood Meridian* subverts the romanticism of the frontier narrative as described by Frederick Jackson Turner. It represents the expansion of America as a mission of genocide, in which both cowboys and Indians lose themselves to their innate savagery. Yet *Blood Meridian* is also more than a narrative of western revisionism; it is an examination of violence unencumbered by the rules of society.

Many critics have interpreted McCarthy's novel as a bleak and nihilistic tale, offering little in the way of hope or redemption. However the protagonist, unnamed but referred to as the kid, is the site in which the potential for goodness exists. Although the kid begins as a violent force of nature, he undergoes a transformation that, by the end of the novel, allows him to reject the savagery Judge Holden believes innate in all men. Thus, the kid's change paves the way for *Blood Meridian's* brief epilogue in which McCarthy offers a parable of the demarcation of the west and an end to Holden's unchecked epidemic of violence. Both the kid and the mysterious figure in the epilogue suggest a redemptive force typical in biblical apocalyptic narratives, and their presence implies a transformation of the current world order.

While the novel has invited interpretations of nihilism, I will suggest that *Blood Meridian*, despite its violence, resists such readings.

Chapter two looks at *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men* as representing a nihilistic mode of apocalypse. In *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy's narrative strategies invite interpretations of the novel as a romantic elegy to the old west. However, as the plot unfolds we are privy to the failure of John Grady's attempts to maintain a cowboy lifestyle in the face of violence and history. His departure from Texas to the ostensibly pastoral Mexico is a reaction against the encroachment of modernity, which he associates with all the chaos and disorder in his life. John Grady's discovery that Mexico is no different emphasises his powerlessness to prevent the course of history; he can only watch bewildered by "what happens to country" (*All the Pretty Horses* 303). *No Country for Old Men* continues this apocalyptic tone in a more ruthless and less sentimental manner. Taking place closer to this present, the novel centres on an aging man named Sheriff Bell who, when confronted with an outburst of violence, bleakly considers the destructive modern world while rhapsodizing nostalgically about some ideal past. As with *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy suggests the futility of romantic notions that cloud the present and future. The world of *No Country for Old Men* is a world lost to drugs, murderers and fugitives. Yet, instead of moving towards the realization of some cataclysmic disaster that will overthrow the current order, as a biblical apocalyptic narrative might, McCarthy offers an unfolding of history that does not promise divine salvation.

Chapter three focuses on *The Road* and in particular how the novel shifts between a biblical apocalyptic reading and a nihilistic apocalyptic reading. Set some time in the future, the world has been rendered a barren wasteland due to an unnamed, though most likely nuclear, disaster. The effect of this cataclysm is to destroy the modernity which was considered malevolent in *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men*. The novel's



blackened and barren landscapes recall the desert setting of *Blood Meridian*, as do the depictions of nihilistic violence and senseless destruction. However, to suggest *The Road* returns to the darkness of McCarthy's first western does the novel a disservice. The ostensibly simple plot focuses on a man and his son who venture across a devastated America towards the coast, though they do not know what awaits them there. Depicting the day-to-day struggle for survival, McCarthy also engages in a philosophical discussion between the man and the boy regarding the point of altruism in an unforgiving world. The man resists his son's desire to help strangers they meet on the road. He, perhaps wisely, prioritizes their well-being above anything else. This elucidates the conflict between pragmatism and idealism that characterises much of McCarthy's fiction. What makes *The Road* distinct from McCarthy's other novels is that he appears to favour the idealism of the boy, who believes goodness can, and should, exist in a world bereft of it. Thus, the boy holds out hope of liberation from a life of constant violence and despair. While the boy's approach seems decidedly messianic (indeed his father often compares him with God), McCarthy's depiction of violence and death in the novel threatens to subvert the boy's belief in goodness, thus producing a narrative which oscillates uncertainly between biblical and nihilistic apocalyptic modes.

## Chapter One: Apocalyptic Time in *Blood Meridian*

“I’d say they’re all gone under now saving me and thee.”

(Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* 327)

McCarthy’s first novel set in the American south-west is a bloody and brutal western epic that ostensibly discards considerations of human morality. Using Samuel E. Chamberlain’s memoir *My Confessions* as a historical source, *Blood Meridian* follows a band of scalp-hunters scouring the Texas-Mexico border for Apache scalps. Interwoven in these vividly written scenes of slaughter are lectures by the monstrous albino Judge Holden, who places the novel’s violence within a Nietzschean philosophical context. Arguing that “[m]oral law is an invention of mankind for the disenfranchisement of the powerful in favor of the weak” (250), he validates the slaughter of Native Americans, Mexicans, and his fellow cowboys. It is nihilism on a biblical scale, the frontier is Holden’s Jericho, and wherever he rides vestiges of civilisation crumble. Various critical assessments seek to position this nihilistic sensibility. Dana Phillips argues that “McCarthy’s fiction ... lacks ... [a] penchant for theology and the jury-rigged, symbolic plot resolutions that make theology seem plausible” (435), a notion reinforced by Steven Shaviro who asserts that “*Blood Meridian* rejects organicist metaphors of growth and decay” (145).

Yet despite the prevalence of horrific and senseless violence, and the apparent lack of moral order, the novel closes with an epilogue suggesting an end to Holden’s destruction. It depicts a man moving across the desert, making holes in the earth with “*an implement with two handles*” (337), while stragglers follow from a distance. Although the passage reads like

a fable or myth,<sup>1</sup> the process of making holes in the ground indicates the construction of a fence. Historically, this act corresponds with Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, which, according to Mary Lawlor, demystified "a vital cultural symbol and ... an actual space in which key promises of a democratic national narrative could be acted out" (41).

McCarthy's next published novel, *All the Pretty Horses*, realizes this historical process by depicting a western landscape that is no longer a "purgatorial waste" (63). Consequently, Jay Ellis sees in *Blood Meridian*'s epilogue the foundation of "a line of division between a world without pity and a world consumed in it" (198). In other words, the anarchic landscape of the west is transformed by history, narrowing "the scope of violent freedom in that country" (Ellis 181). For Ellis, free space becomes restrictive and claustrophobic place.

This chapter will investigate further this change Ellis speaks of through the framework of biblical apocalypse. Initially, the novel does not adhere to the traditional patterns of this particular eschatology – its sense of time appears relentless and repetitive, "they rode on" is a commonly repeated phrase, and McCarthy seems to show little interest in the fates of his characters.<sup>2</sup> However, through the development of Judge Holden and the kid, and their relationship with each other, the novel articulates an underlying teleological pattern of history that moves towards apocalyptic transformation. I will argue that despite Holden's authoritativeness, his assertion that war is god is subject to sublimation by historical change.

While much critical attention paid to *Blood Meridian* has been focussed on the Judge, the kid's rejection of Holden's ideology of war positions him as not only central to the novel, but also as the source of renewal that is intrinsic in biblical eschatology. Drawing from American ideological tropes such as individualism, spiritual regeneration, and relinquishment

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Bloom theorizes that the man in the epilogue could be "a new Prometheus ... rising up to go against [The Judge]" (*How to Read and Why* 263).

<sup>2</sup> The phrase "optical democracy" (*Blood Meridian* 247) refers to the novel's supposed equal treatment of man, nature and beast. As a result, *Blood Meridian* discards anthropological concerns: "the novel's narrative thrust ultimately renders the desert hostile to human signification altogether" (Guillemin 81).

of the past, McCarthy depicts the kid as fulfilling the desire for apocalyptic transformation. Although his anarchic proclivities, and his death at the hands of the Judge, overtly imply failure to chart a course away from the novel's violence, his ability to develop a moral centre in a world bereft of morality is of significance. This moral development, furthermore, anticipates the aforementioned epilogue, an allegory of the frontier's closure. What comes next is not exactly New Jerusalem, but the quiet desert of *All the Pretty Horses*. Despite this tenuous promise of the future, *Blood Meridian* still proceeds along a biblical apocalyptic line, which I first identify, before going on to show how an apocalyptic reading counteracts interpretations of the novel as nihilistic or devoid of meaning and order.

### ***1. Resistance of linear time: Holden and the narrator***

Although the Book of Revelation depicts Armageddon as a fiery and cataclysmic war, Biblical apocalyptists regard the end as a positive event. The "supernatural in-breaking of eminently Divine activity" (Nelson 157) involves the arrival of a new and prosperous age, in which New Jerusalem will descend from heaven, God's followers will receive salvation, and the sinners will be sent to hell. This particular concept of 'the end' developed in the Middle Ages when the Jewish people, oppressed by Roman rule, questioned their status as God's chosen people. Their only way of reconciling a harsh reality with the promises of their faith<sup>3</sup> was to envision a radical transformation of the world, a rupture in the course of human history that would liberate them from oppression. Therefore, Apocalyptic thought, argues Debra Borgoffen, is anti-historical because "it assesses the course of history negatively (history is the time of sin and evil which will ultimately be destroyed and transcended)" (14).

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<sup>3</sup> Norman Cohn writes "save to some extent for the Persians, the Jews were alone in combining an uncompromising monotheism with an unshakable conviction that they were themselves the Chosen People of the one God" (19).

My utilization of apocalypse theory will pay particular attention to its philosophical approaches to time and history. Time in biblical eschatology is teleological, moving towards a prophesised and greatly desired event. Thus, patterns of history that are cyclical or continue without end are rejected. Zamora suggests this is evident in the narrative structure of biblical apocalypse: “[t]he seven seals are broken to reveal, one after another, the calamities which God will visit upon the earth; the seventh seal reveals seven angels who are given seven trumpets ... after which yet another set of seven, the seven vials of God’s wrath are enumerated” (*Writing the Apocalypse* 13). This progression of events following events also reinforces the determinism of apocalyptic history and, consequently, humankind’s inability to stop it.<sup>4</sup> What this determinism ultimately affords us is the ability to imbue history, and our lives, with meaning. In writing about endings, Frank Kermode argues that for “[m]en ... to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems” (7). Unwilling to consider existence in ‘the midst,’ apocalyptic thought envisions a revelation at the end of history that will give human existence purpose. Zamora reiterates this: “God’s Last Judgement will give significance to all that has gone before and justify the suffering of those who have remained faithful to God’s word” (*Writing the Apocalypse* 11). Thus, the promise of a new beginning infuses biblical eschatology with a great sense of hope.

Apocalypse narratives have traditionally emerged out of times of crisis, or societal dissatisfaction; their attraction comes from the promise of a better world than the one that exists now. This was true of early Puritan settlers arriving on the shores of the New World after their escape from an old and corrupt Europe. Daniel Wojcik recognizes in early Puritan writing a belief that “they had been elected by God to fulfil a divinely determined historical plan” (21). The promise of America to offer a new heaven and a new earth inspired

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<sup>4</sup> However, that is not to imply a lack of free will. The choices made by men and women, leading up to the end, determine their fate at divine judgement.

eschatological feelings of renewal and redemption. Colonials saw themselves as God's chosen people,<sup>5</sup> whose "faith ... in America as 'the earth's millennial fourth quarter' [and] a nation vouchsafed a privileged destiny as the site of the culmination of a divinely ordained historical narrative" (Torry 9). For Zamora, "the New World's promise exerted irresistible attraction upon many Europeans who came to convert the Indians, to find that golden Jerusalem called El Dorado, to exercise the religious, political, and economic freedom impossible in the Old World" (*Apocalyptic Vision* 1). This notion of shedding the skin of Europe and beginning anew is an idea that resonated in America, and which Frederick Jackson Turner reiterated in his frontier thesis. He argued that the development of a unique American identity necessitated the loosening of Old World ties. "Little by Little," Turner suggests, "[the colonial] transforms the wilderness ... But the outcome is not the old Europe ... here is a new product that is American" (33 - 34). The open and uncharted space of the American west became an enticing alternative to the Old World: "[t]o understand this one needs to carry one's imaginings all the way back to the old country, to Europe, and try to gain a feeling for the sense of limits, of being hopelessly locked in" (McMurtry 188). Turner's frontier thesis romanticised the mission of Manifest Destiny, arguing for western expansion as an integral part of the construction of national identity.<sup>6</sup> Dawn Glanz identifies the influence of apocalyptic ideas on this journey westward. She writes that "millennial thinking, and particularly the concept of America's messianic role ... was especially evident in the way Americans regarded their remarkable expansion into the West ... western territories were referred to as the new Promised Land" (141).

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<sup>5</sup> Puritan figures Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards and Timothy Dwight spoke of America as a nation "God had chosen ... in the accomplishment of His plan. America ... was to become a paradigm of peace, righteousness and freedom ... and her virtues would go on forth to redeem the rest of the world" (Wojcik 141).

<sup>6</sup> Although Turner's thesis gave America a national myth, Neil Campbell suggests its exclusion of other important narratives is problematic. Campbell writes that this "need for a national origin story occluded the recognition of the true nature of the historical processes being played out across [the frontier] and sought only to reduce these to a managed set of images and stories that would become the West's official history" (*Cultures of the New West* 3). By mythologizing western expansion across the frontier, Turner simplifies history.

McCarthy's representation of the frontier as a "cratered void" (46), with "death [as its] most prevalent feature" (48), positions *Blood Meridian* as a subversion of Turner's thesis. The novel's depiction of westward expansion as a massacre of men, women and children from all cultural backgrounds, suggests McCarthy is undermining received narratives of romanticised frontier history. In this sense, *Blood Meridian* can be seen as belonging to the school of western revisionism. Yet this assertion has divided critics. Neil Campbell, believing McCarthy has revisionist concerns, argues that the novel's rejection of Turner's thesis "begins the process of destabilization and ambivalence ... in order to rupture expectations and beliefs" ("Liberty Beyond Its Proper Bounds" 217). Similarly, Dan Moos asserts that "McCarthy presents us [in *Blood Meridian*] a kind of memory or a history we believed long masked. He serves to us this return of the repressed" (24). On the other hand, Harold Bloom sees the supernatural Judge Holden and the fantastical descriptions of landscape as inclining the novel towards myth.<sup>7</sup> "The particular nightmares that are being rendered so vividly by McCarthy," Bloom argues, "are his own nightmares. It is a very individualized mode of perceiving carnage" (15). Jay Ellis contends that a mythic interpretation does not necessarily dilute its historical resonance, nor does considering the novel within a historical context lessen its fantastical elements. Ellis writes, "we need not choose [a particular reading] of McCarthy: he works in both areas, and the links between things that have indeed 'happened to the American West' and the older stories echoing in McCarthy's imagery simply add to the power ... of his achievement" (193). Reiterating this, David Holmberg suggests that "McCarthy's novel works to deflate the now obvious historical fraudulence of a heroic settlement of the West, but doing so means participating in both the history and the myth, a complicated, overlapping and simultaneous project" (146). My reading of *Blood Meridian* will take a similar perspective, elucidating the way western history works in conjunction with

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<sup>7</sup> See Stacey Pebbles's "Yuman Belief Systems and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*" for an analysis of how the mythology and ideology of the Yuma Indians informs the third section of the novel.

the mythological narrative patterns of biblical apocalypse to create a reading of the novel that reacts against charges of nihilism.

If *Blood Meridian* engages in apocalyptic myth making, then Judge Holden's violent reign echoes the stretch of dystopian time that takes place before the arrival of divine salvation. In the Book of Revelation this transitional time is a period of three and a half years ruled by the Anti-Christ, and is a "period of nightmare ... [of] dislocation of personal and public relationships [and] the confusion of reality and appearance, fear of the future are its features" (Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* 46). However, this period of torment will ultimately end with Christ's Second Coming, initiating his one thousand year reign on earth. Judge Holden, standing as an allegorical Satan, resists this prophecy by attempting to impose his control over history. He asserts that "[the man] who sets himself the task of singling out the thread of order from the tapestry will by decision alone have taken charge of the world ... [and thus] dictate the terms of his own fate" (199). His large, white body symbolizes this resistance to history. When the gang strip down for a public bath, their bodies, bearing the marks of history, are "tattooed, branded, sutured" (167). The Judge's naked body however "shone like the moon so pale he was and not a hair to be seen anywhere upon that vast corpus, not in any crevice nor in the great bores of his nose and not upon his chest nor in his ears nor any tuft at all above his eyes nor to the lids thereof" (167). His unmarked body is free from the impositions of history and time, a fact reinforced at the end of the novel when the kid confronts the Judge after a forty-year absence and discovers he has not aged a day. Joshua J. Masters claims that "the judge remains free from the telos endemic of a closed system; thus, any role, rule, or law can be invoked or revoked as the situation warrants, for the only 'end' the judge recognizes is encapsulated within his own ego" (26). However, the Judge's defiance of a telos, or ending, does not suggest control over history itself. Aspiring to control time is not the same as having it. This is something Holden is all too aware of; when



conversing with a fellow cowboy he says “everywhere upon [the earth] are pockets of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation” (199). Thus, his mission in the novel is to wrench autonomy from the world and exert his mastery over it; he attempts to achieve this by using violence as a tool to subvert and reverse historical progress.

Violence in *Blood Meridian* is pervasive and horrifically rendered, elucidating the lack of benevolence across the frontier and emphasising the depravity of those who inhabit it. McCarthy paints neither the cowboys nor the Native Americans in a sympathetic light; he avoids overtly politicising the novel while demystifying the romanticism of the frontier. Both the colonials and the indigenous are equally malevolent, demonstrating an insatiable lust for bloodshed. This is seen early in the novel when a band of filibusters trek across the western landscape and come across an army of Comanche Indians. Both groups immediately engage in battle:

some [came] with nightmare faces painted on their breasts, riding down the unhorsed Saxons and spearing and clubbing them and leaping from their mounts with knives ... like creatures driven to alien forms of locomotion and stripping the clothes from the dead and seizing them up by the hair passing their blades about the skulls of the living and the dead alike and snatching aloft the bloody wigs and hacking and chopping at the naked bodies, ripping off limbs, heads, gutting the strange white torsos and holding up great handfuls of viscera ... Dust stanced the wet and naked heads of the scalped who with the fringe of hair below their wounds tonsured to the bone now lay like maimed and naked monks in the bloodslaked dust and everywhere the dying groaned and gibbered and horses lay screaming. (54)

Certain critical reactions to the novel's violence note that the depravity is accompanied by a kind of artistic exhilaration. Susan Kollin writes that "McCarthy's graphic treatment of Anglo brutality becomes aestheticized to the extent that audiences often experience a strange pleasure in reading these hyperviolent meditations" (8). Steven Shaviro echoes this sentiment: "[r]eading *Blood Meridian* produces a vertiginous, nauseous exhilaration. A strong compulsion draws us through the text, something beyond either fascination or horror ... Bloody death is our monotonously predictable destiny; yet its baroque opulence is attended with a frighteningly complicitous joy" (144). Vince Brewton suggests that the effect of such powerful violence overwhelms the novel's other factors. For Brewton, "[w]hile McCarthy supplies particulars of geography, the reader experiences a collapse of time and space so that only the ceaseless repetition of violence remains foregrounded, enacted in a kind of no-place of desolation" (131).

This is apparent in Holden's claim that violence and war unifies existence; such an assertion subjugates notions of morality and compassion, collapsing the distinction between good and evil. He says, "howevermuch [man] comes to value his judgements he ultimately must submit them before a higher court. Here there can be no special pleading. Here are considerations of equity and rectitude and moral right rendered void" (250). This 'higher court' is the ideology of war, an ideology that transcends, Holden believes, all other considerations. However, the abolition of morality in favour of anarchic violence is not commensurate with some of the other scalp-hunter's beliefs. When Holden murders an Apache child, after initially sparing it from a village raid, Toadvine puts "the muzzle of his pistol against the great dome of the judge's head" (164) in outrage. The murder of a child spurs whatever moral conscience is left in the cowboy. Yet, Toadvine's participation in the massacre of the child's village highlights the irony of his protest. For Shaviro, "the perversity of [Holden] scalping the child after it has come to trust him [is] no greater than the initial

perversity of rescuing it from an otherwise total holocaust” (147). In other words, Holden demonstrates the futility of attempting to draw moral lines within the sphere of violence that the scalp-hunters inhabit. His transgressions merely unveil the illusory nature of morality and emphasise the totalising amorality of war. As the novel progresses, the scalp-hunters internalise Holden’s ideology, becoming “primal, provisional, devoid of order. Like beings provoked out of the absolute rock and set nameless and at no remove from their own loomings to wander ravenous and doomed” (172). They are reduced to primitive killing machines (“there was nothing about these arrivals to suggest even the discovery of the wheel” (232)), unthreading the moral progress made by history and civilization.

This violence extends to the landscape itself. After surviving the attack by Comanche Indians, the kid discovers “a bush ... hung with dead babies [with] holes punched in their underjaws and ... hung by their throats from the broken stobs of mesquite to stare eyeless at the naked sky” (57). The terrain the cowboys traverse is barren, hostile and death strewn. Even the towns and settlements around the frontier are not immune from the consequences of violence: “they went slowly through the little mud streets. There were goats and sheep slain in their pens and pigs dead in the mud. They passed mud hovels where people lay murdered in all attitudes of death in the doorways and the floors, naked and swollen and strange” (58). After the scalp-hunters raid and massacre a Native American village “[t]he desert wind would salt their ruins and there would be nothing, nor ghost nor scribe, to tell to any pilgrim in his passing how it was that people had lived in this place and in this place died” (174). History is literally erased by violence, their small community now as blank as Holden’s unblemished skin. Further underlining this absence of morality is the prevalence of desecrated churches. The first church the kid comes across “bore an array of saints in their niches and they had been shot up by American troops ... the figures shorn of ears and noses ... a carved stone Virgin held in her arms a headless child” (26 - 27). In another church, he discovers “scalped

and naked and partly eaten bodies of some forty souls who'd barricaded themselves in this house of God against the heathen" (60).

Interestingly, Holden's mission to reverse human progress does not extend to himself. He remains highly cultured, seductively articulate and intelligent through the entirety of the novel. Tobin says of the Judge, "he can cut a trail, shoot a rifle, ride a horse, track a deer. He's been all over the world. Him and the governor they sat up till breakfast and it was Paris this and London that in five languages" (123). This contradiction between Holden's intelligence and the barbarity he commits and promulgates suggests he is concocting something more malevolent than simply spreading a mantra of war. After convincing the scalp-hunters of the falseness of biblical scripture, "the squatters in their rags nodded among themselves and were soon reckoning [Holden] correct, this man of learning ... and this the judge encouraged until they were right proselytes of the new order whereupon he laughed at them for fools" (116). Holden's deception allows him to maintain true knowledge about the world, and dominion over those who are fed his lies. We can see a similar process occurring in his destruction and replication of nature.

Analyzing the significance of the American south-west desert's emptiness, John Beck investigates the ways in which this blankness invites varying interpretations by different groups for different purposes. He concludes that the desert's "metaphorical construction ... despite historical change, has remained largely consistent with the notions of vacancy and chaos, notions that enable the validation of particular cultural and ideological positions" (64). Yet, at the same time, the very barrenness of the landscape "reveals to the human gaze the elemental resistance of the nonhuman to recuperation." The desert's hostile emptiness rejects ideologies of expansion and colonisation, thereby inciting violence by "frustrated

conqueror[s] ... [who desire] the Euclidian logic of the flat plane, the clean and empty surface, unsullied by aberrant and disruptive presences” (Beck 70).

*Blood Meridian*’s frontier explicitly responds to Beck’s notions of the desert as hostile and barren. This is first evident when Captain White and his army of filibusters trek into the desert: “[s]ave for scattered clumps of buckbrush and pricklypear and the little patches of twisted grass the ground was bare and there were low mountains to the south and they were bare too” (42). Yet it is within this nothingness that Beck sees “a yearning toward destruction,” and questions whether the desert, “as a particular topographical site, [stands] for the terminal point in an entire history of U.S. pursuit of a tabula rasa” (70). In this respect, “Manifest Destiny is here rewritten to mean an unlimited attack on the desert as Other, which culminates in the desert as all-encompassing, the obliterated, uninterrupted space of absolute power” (70). In other words, the desert wasteland invites further destruction by those who wish to occupy it, and, subsequently, provide a blank canvas so they can rewrite history. Judge Holden responds to the landscape in a similar way:

The rocks about in every sheltered place were covered with ancient paintings and the judge was soon among them copying out those certain ones into his book to take away with him ... When he had done and while there yet was light he returned to a certain stone ledge and sat a while and studied again the work there. Then he rose and with a piece of broken chert he scapped away one of the designs, leaving no trace of it only a raw place on the stone where it had been. (173)

The purpose, he asserts, is to become “suzerain of the earth” (198). “The judge placed his hands on the ground ... This is my claim, he said. And yet everywhere upon it are pockets

of autonomous life. Autonomous. In order for it to be mine nothing must be permitted to occur upon it save by my dispensation” (199). Despite his authority in the novel, Holden still lacks complete control over the frontier. His claim is “also a complaint [and] his powers here are limited” (Ellis 287). Believing that God “speaks in stones and trees, the bones of things” (116), he wishes to “expunge [these artefacts] from the memory of man” (140). Neil Campbell argues that “by reducing life to its constituents, its bones, [Holden] can ‘read’ it, engulf it and ultimately control it” (“Liberty Beyond its Proper Bounds” 223). Thus, by recording natural and cultural artefacts in a ledger book, before destroying them, he “becomes the sole owner of knowledge, not his own in an individualistic sense, but of a singular collected knowledge that allows him to reproduce the world and ultimately command it” (Moos 30). This also extends towards Holden’s desire to control time. By erasing natural and, particularly, cultural artefacts Holden is erasing history itself, and thus his replication of it in his ledger book grants him a large degree of authorial control. He is able to reinterpret how the world was and, consequently, dictate how it will be.

Critics such as Denis Sansom and Steven Shaviro suggest, because of his authoritative presence in the novel, Holden speaks for either God or the author himself. Arguing that *Blood Meridian* functions as a critique of divine determinism, Sansom suggests that Holden is “God’s prophet” (6), an agent of destruction merely acting out the Lord’s will. Thus, the novel precludes the potential for redemption because violence and bloodshed are part of a divine if malevolent plan. For Sansom war and death in the novel are sanctioned by God, and this dissolves the relevance of right and wrong. He further contends that the novel proposes, “in moral terms ... no difference between nihilism and divine sovereign determinism, for each is beyond good and evil” (5). This, Sansom argues, is evident in “McCarthy’s refusal to pass moral judgement on anything” (13). Shaviro echoes this sentiment by claiming that “what is most disturbing about the orgies of violence that punctuate *Blood Meridian* is that they fail to

constitute a pattern, unveil a mystery or to serve any comprehensible purpose” (147).

Additionally, for Denis Donoghue, “the events in the novel are barbarous [but] they seem to be protected from any ethical comment” (406).

I would argue however, that the apparent lack of any overt moral weight attached to *Blood Meridian*’s representation of violence does not necessarily suggest indifference or nihilism. Unlike Sansom, I propose that there are competing forces at work across the novel’s frontier. Judge Holden may occupy a large amount of the text, but the omniscient narrator challenges his will to power. This is apparent through subtle narrative interjections that serve to redraw the lines of morality Holden transgresses through his violence. When an old Indian woman is executed, the narrator describes “the explosion [that] filled all that sad little park” (98). Later on: “in three days [the scalp-hunters] would fall upon a band of peaceful Tiguas camped on the river and slaughter them every soul” (173). The narrator even vilifies the Judge himself, calling him “the vast abhorrence” (243). Although such protests may seem insignificant against Holden’s demonic and overwhelming presence, the narrator’s position outside the main action of the novel grants him greater authority. *Blood Meridian*’s narrator, like the biblical apocalypticist, “stands outside of time, recounting the past, present, and future from an atemporal point of view beyond the end of time” (Zamora, *Apocalyptic Vision* 3). Throughout the novel the narrator demonstrates knowledge of past, present and future with comments such as “[n]ow come the days of begging, days of theft” (15), and “[i]n the predawn dark the sounds about describe the scene to come” (104). Furthermore, the narrator’s ability to follow various characters gives it the omniscience that Holden tries to acquire through his violence and ledger book. This resistance is further taken up by the kid, who McCarthy positions as the physical presence to challenge Holden and his anarchic and destructive power.

## 2. *The Kid*

If Holden imposes a temporal stasis, preventing movement towards apocalyptic transformation, then the kid's individualism and potential for self-improvement positions him as the locus of change in the novel. Relinquishing his past in Tennessee,<sup>8</sup> where his father "lies in drink [and] quotes from poets whose names are now lost" (3), the kid heads into the unfettered west like so many of his colonial ancestors. However, it is "a taste for mindless violence" (3), and not the ideology of Manifest Destiny, that compels him. The first section of the novel is largely dedicated to the kid's anarchic journey westward, fighting "[m]en from lands so far and queer" (4), occasionally meeting Holden's enigmatic gaze. His aimlessness takes him from one violent encounter to the next until he joins an army of filibusters lead by the racist Captain White. What follows is the first of many encounters with Native American warriors; the army is massacred, and the kid is left wandering again.

Despite his violent proclivities, and lack of idealism, the kid's journey ultimately mirrors the nation's mission of establishing an identity that relinquishes the past and heralds a new world. The narrator states this at the beginning of the novel: "[the kid's] origins are become remote as his destiny and not again in all the world's turning will there be terrains so wild and barbarous to try whether the stuff of creation may be shaped to man's will or whether his own heart is not another kind of clay" (4 - 5). Anticipating Holden's own assertion that "if war is not holy man is nothing but antic clay" (307), this statement questions the kid's ability to chart an autonomous trajectory outside the will of the Judge. I will suggest that the kid's relationship with Holden, his relative altruism towards comrades and strangers, and his final transformation into 'the man,' demonstrate not only a resistance to the game of war, but also a desire for progress and change. In this sense, the kid's journey corresponds

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<sup>8</sup> The kid's move from south to the south-west mirrors the shift in locale of McCarthy's novels.



with biblical apocalyptic narratives that depict a corrupt and unjust society facing subjugation by a divine force.

In *Blood Meridian*'s middle section, the kid only enters the text between passages of extreme violence. These often brief reprieves depict the kid performing acts of compassion that are inconsistent with his earlier actions. He spares a wounded Shelby despite orders to kill him (207), he helps Brown pull an arrow from his leg (162), and he refuses to shoot the naked and defenceless Judge (285). Such behaviour is rare in a frontier culture that values brutality and self-interest. As Holden says: "[w]hat joins men together ... is not the sharing of bread but the sharing of enemies" (307). Thus, the kid's "clemency for the heathen" (299) is also a refusal of Holden's philosophical lectures on the nature of humankind and their relationship with violence. Unlike the other scalp-hunters, the kid does not fall under Holden's sphere of influence. This offends the Judge because he claims he loved the kid "like a son" (306). Consequently, the kid's rejection echoes his abandonment of his father, reiterating a desire to be "unentailed" (330) from authority. However, Holden's assertion is odd for the novel never suggests a father/son relationship between the two. What does occur between them is a series of brief and silent exchanges, in which Holden smiles and the kid remains stoic.

The kid's stoicism is characteristic and ties him to ideas of renewal and regeneration. It also seems a factor in his absence from the skirmishes between Glanton's gang and the Native Americans. Although the novel infers he is a willing participant in the various slaughters, McCarthy does not depict the kid committing these acts of barbarism. This narrative decision suggests that something is developing within him and readers will not be privy to until the scalp-hunters disband. In my opinion, in the moments that the kid does emerge, it is to offer a moral counter point to Holden's nihilistic sermons. However, this is

not immediately apparent. After the Glanton gang slaughter a tribe of Tigua Indians,<sup>9</sup> “Toadvine and the kid conferred together and when they rode out at noon the day following they trotted their horses alongside Bathcat. They rode in silence. Them sons of bitches aint botherin nobody, Toadvine said” (173). Toadvine’s protest is undermined by the “livid letters tattooed on his forehead and ... the lank greasy hair that hung from his earless skull” (173). The kid, meanwhile, appears to offer little opposition through his silence which has caused Steven Shaviro to argue that the kid’s refusal to speak is a manifestation of indifference to the slaughter he both witnesses and commits. For Shaviro, there is “no determinate quality ... that leads to the kid’s hesitation at certain crucial moments” (149), rather his resistance is simply demonstrative of a lack of inner life. The kid’s “evasive blankness marks a deferral but not an exemption from the all embracing game of war” (Shaviro 150). These acts of resistance seem insignificant against the Judge’s long winding philosophical lectures.

My own view is that in McCarthy’s text silence itself can function as a significant mode of resistance. This is evident when the kid refuses to execute a wounded scalp-hunter named Shelby. Tracing a line of moral development in the kid, Jay Ellis suggests this refusal begins his journey to “higher ground” (159). However, according to Ellis, the scene itself reveals the kid’s failure to “reassemble an evolved morality” for he “neither [shoots] nor really [helps] Shelby” (157). Ellis perceives the kid’s inability to make a choice as evidence of his moral deficiency. Yet, by doing nothing, the kid defers the choice to Shelby: “[i]f you want me to just leave you I will,” he offers (207). Essentially, this course of action, or inaction, removes both the kid and Shelby from Holden’s game of war in which “[t]he whole universe ... has labored clanking to this moment which will tell if he is to die at that man’s hand or that man at his” (249). The scene ends not with death but with the kid dragging

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<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Imber Shaw notes the distinction between the attack on the Tigua Indians and encounters with other Native Americans in the novel. For Shaw “the description of the attack on the Tiguas seems rather restrained. There is none of the minute attention to the particulars of physical trauma and resulting anatomical damage that marks many other passages” (213).

Shelby under some bushes to avoid discovery by their pursuers. A similar incident occurs later when the kid has the opportunity to shoot the naked and defenceless Holden. However, despite Tobin's urges to shoot "or your life is forfeit" (285), the kid puts the pistol in his belt.

His inaction thus seems indicative of a revolutionary spirit nestled within him. Interestingly, this positions the kid as an object of desire for not only Holden, but also other characters in the novel. When he takes shelter with a strange hermit, they discuss the ways of the world. The hermit speaks philosophically on human nature, echoing Holden's own nihilistic tirades: "[y]ou can find meanness in the least of creatures, but when God made man the devil was at his elbow. A creature that can do anything. Make a machine. And a machine to make the machine. And evil that can run itself a thousand years, no need to tend it" (19). However, unlike the Judge, the hermit does not take this as an affirmation or celebration of human violence. His words articulate a world that responds to the transitional time before divine intervention I discussed earlier. The hermit continues: "[t]he way of the transgressor is hard. God made this world, but he didnt make it to suit everbody" (19). I read this phrase as an indirect reference to the kid and his larger role in the story, which is to forge a path away from Holden's dominion. After they talk, the kid wakes to find the hermit "bent over him and all but in his bed" (20). The kid, unsettled, asks him what he wants and the hermit scuttles away into the darkness. The kid's potential to transgress draws the hermit to him in a manner that is disturbing because of paedophilic intentions that taint Holden by implication.

Ex-priest Tobin is also drawn to the kid, taking on a didactical role. Edwin T. Arnold suggests that Tobin could function as an avatar for McCarthy, or at least represent "the other side of the dialectic" ("Naming, Knowing and Nothingness" 61). This is evident in the seemingly benevolent advice he offers the kid, grooming him to face the Judge. Throughout the novel, Tobin speaks of his Christian faith and offers spiritual wisdom and guidance: "[the Lord] has an uncommon love for the common man [and he] speaks in the least of creatures"

(123). Like the hermit, Tobin sees the kid's potential to transgress as potential to challenge the Judge. Thus, the ex-priest paints Holden as a diabolical figure in order to foster the kid's animosity towards him. Such is the case when he recounts the story of the Glanton gang's first encounter with the Judge. Tobin describes Holden sitting "on his rock there in that wilderness by his single self ... [just] smilin as [they] rode up. Like he'd been expectin [them]" (125). Stranded in the desert with no ammunition and facing an attack, Glanton quickly establishes "a secret commerce ... [S]ome terrible covenant" with Holden (126). The Judge, a "bloody dark pastryman" (132), saves the gang by concocting gun powder from dirt and urine. The Faustian overtones of this passage serve to reinforce Holden's supernatural presence and further damn Glanton and his men.

Yet, despite Tobin's wisdom, the kid eventually comes to reject him as he rejects Holden. Two incidents demonstrate this refusal: first, when Holden asks for help to kill a horse for meat, Tobin leans over to the kid and says "[p]ay him no mind lad." The kid responds, "[y]ou think I'm afraid of [Holden]?" (219) and goes to help him. The second, and perhaps more significant, refusal comes when the scalp-hunters disband after an ambush by the Yuma Indians. Holden appears in the desert naked and unarmed, giving the kid an opportunity to shoot him. I have already observed how this scene reinforces the kid's rejection of Holden's game of war, but it also elucidates his insistence on charting a new course of his own volition. He sees no more value in Tobin's philosophising than he does Holden's. In order for the kid to be autonomous, he must relinquish authority and embrace individualism and newness.

Newness also informs the kid's connection with children in the novel. Although he begins as an anarchic and feral force, from the opening pages McCarthy emphasises his innocence

“untouched behind the scars” (4). Susan Kollin argues that *Blood Meridian* considers “children ... to be as threatening and expendable as any of the other figures in the text” (12). It is true that children are not exempt from the novel’s horrific carnage, yet McCarthy rarely shows their actual murders. Instead, they are usually found dead and scalped, or hung from bushes. In a novel so explicit in its representation of violence, this refrain from depicting the murder of children suggests a moral boundary that is rarely transgressed.

It is significant, therefore, that the novel also does not describe the kid’s rape and murder. Although he is middle aged when Holden kills him, the Judge develops a sexual interest towards the kid early in the novel. Patrick W. Shaw suggests Holden’s violation and murder of children, and his adoption of the idiot James Robert, inform his paedophilic desire for the cowboy. For Shaw, although “McCarthy omits the characteristic gory details from the scenes involving the judge and children, he constructs a sequence of events that gives us ample information to visualize how Holden molests a child, then silences him with aggression” (“The Kid’s Fate” 110). Holden makes his feelings for the kid known in prison when he reaches through the bars imploring him to “[c]ome here [and] let me touch you” (307). However, beyond this need to consume him, whether through sex or murder, is a greater desire to extinguish what the kid, and subsequently all children in the novel, represents. Children, by representing forward movement and growth, threaten Holden’s desire for stasis and continued unending violence.

The kid’s connection with children, additionally, draws attention to his difference from the other scalp-hunters. Although he shares their taste in bloodshed, he develops along a separate trajectory to his comrades and is therefore able to avoid succumbing to a barbaric frontier culture. This is made explicit when he catches up with the gang after a brief separation: “[the scalp-hunters] looked bad ... used up and bloody and black about the eyes ... and their clothes were crusted with dried blood and powderblack. Glanton ... and his haggard

riders stared balefully at the kid as if he were no part of them for all they were so like in wretchedness of circumstance” (218). This difference is moral growth, and reveals itself when the kid stumbles across an Indian woman in the wilderness.

He told her that he was an American and that he was a long way from the country of his birth and that he had no family and that he had travelled much and seen many things and had been at war and endured hardships. He told her that he would convey her to a safe place, some party of her countrypeople who would welcome her and that she should join them for he could not leave her in this place or she would surely die ... He reached into the little cove and touched her arm ... She weighed nothing. She was just a dried shell and she had been dead in that place for years. (315)

Jay Ellis argues that the dead Indian woman symbolizes the kid’s failure to redeem himself from the slaughter of her people. He writes, “this confession ... reaches only the air ... It is too late for the kid – or the man – to make this confession, let alone offer some kindness to an old woman in need, as he has already taken part in too much killing of innocents” (164). Yet Ellis ignores the intent behind the kid’s act, and thus ignores what the kid’s ability to offer help signifies about the extent of his moral development in such an overwhelmingly immoral world. Reaching out to aid the woman certainly goes beyond his acts of altruism with the scalp-hunters, especially since the kid unloads his inner life.

Other critics agree with Ellis’s reading, arguing that the kid fails more than he succeeds. Reading the novel through a Gnostic lens, Leo Daugherty suggests the kid has a spark of the alien divine, obtaining a “will outside the will of his murdering shepherdic subculture and the archon who runs it ... [he] has ‘awakened,’ but he is not progressed sufficiently in wisdom much beyond mere awakening and thus has no chance at survival”

(162 - 163). Although Edwin T. Arnold argues for the existence of morality in *Blood Meridian*, he reiterates this failure to move beyond simple resistance: “by failing to examine his heart, to name and face the judge, to acknowledge responsibility the kid ... runs out of time [and is] embraced by ... the judge in the outhouse” (“Naming, Knowing and Nothingness” 63). Yet, I contend that the kid’s confrontation with Holden at the Griffin bar constitutes a significant rejection of the Judge’s philosophy. Standing up to Holden and calling him crazy (330) and “nothin” (331) implies a large degree of inner strength, especially considering their previous interactions when all the kid could do was remain silent. The Judge is compelled to kill and rape the kid because of what he represents. As Patrick W. Shaw argues, Holden’s decision to violate the kid sexually enacts a particularly nefarious method of extermination. Shaw writes, “[A]fter a lifetime of defending himself against the ultimate degradation, practically no other disclosure could humiliate the kid so thoroughly. This triumph over the kid is what the exhibitionistic and homoerotic judge celebrates by dancing naked atop the wall, just as he did after assaulting the half-breed boy” (“The Kid’s Fate” 118). Shaw’s argument, in detailing the lengths to which Holden will go in order to destroy the kid, supports my own contention that the kid’s significance is much greater than other critics have allowed.

### ***3. The Epilogue***

The novel’s epilogue, describing a man “*progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground*” (337), shares no explicit connections with the central narrative.

Thus, critical analyses of this enigmatic passage range from a mythological reading to an interpretation of it as an allegory of the frontier’s closure. The latter interpretation also informs my reading of the epilogue, particularly as it relates to biblical apocalyptic thought. In this chapter, I have argued that Holden strives for temporal stasis through violence, asserting

that war is indisputably more sacred than morality. Consequently, the Judge's rationalizations and justifications of violence reduce the frontier and its inhabitants to "wastes hardly reckonable more than those whited regions on old maps where monsters do live and where there is nothing other of the known world save conjectural winds" (152). Yet, despite his authoritative presence, other forces move in to resist him. There is the omniscient narrator, who mourns and condemns the acts of violence, and the kid. Both figures seek to redraw lines of morality that Holden destroys with anarchic glee. However, the man in the epilogue is also drawing a line, which he makes with "an implement with two handles" (337).

Although *Blood Meridian*'s main narrative ends with Holden dancing naked on stage, proclaiming "he will never die" (335), I would argue that the epilogue both undermines this assertion and reiterates the kid's significance in the novel. The man wielding the two handed implement continues the kid's resistance of Holden's doctrine, albeit more forcefully. He is enacting the apocalyptic transformation of the frontier by abolishing, or at least restricting, the Judge's dominion.

As with biblical apocalypse traditions, the period of long and chaotic rule by the Anti-Christ is supplanted by divine rule. To appreciate the significance of this apocalyptic transformation of the frontier it is necessary to recall the nature of the final biblical apocalypse and the supplanting by divine rule of the long and chaotic rule by the Anti-Christ. In the Book of Revelation this is New Jerusalem descending from heaven welcoming God's chosen people. The new world "must ... be distinguished from fictions of desire that envision a return to Eden or a past golden age" (Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* 17). This is consistent with eschatological thought that envisions time as moving forward, even as the apocalypse interrupts the course of history. Zamora further suggests that while "[n]ostalgia for an idealized past is related to a longing for an idealized future ... the former is based on the undoing of historical experience, the latter on the completing of it" (*Writing the Apocalypse*



17 - 18). Thus, this new world is informed by the history that preceded it while abolishing the evil and sin that necessitated divine intervention in the first place.

*Blood Meridian's* new world is a frontier of fences. The epilogue unites apocalyptic myth with the history of the American west by depicting its closure as a result of finite expansion and the arrival of modernity. The man's two handed implement, "[enkindling] the stone in the hole with his steel ... striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there" (337), cannot be anything but "a post-hole digger" (Ellis 192). Thus, he is laying down the foundation for a fence and as McCarthy demonstrates in *All the Pretty Horses*, fences serve to restrict the kind of unencumbered movement Glanton and his men revel in. The "cratered void" (46) is transformed into something new. However, critics such as Harold Bloom reject such an historical interpretation. He instead sees the epilogue as Promethean:

That two-handed engine, that implement, is being wielded by a figure striking fire that is imprisoned in the stone, which is clearly a Promethean motif. The Judge is off in the meridian sunset. That figure is at dawn. Clearly there is an opposition. There is, I think, a hint—a hint, but a real one—I don't know otherwise how to interpret it—that a kind of new Prometheus or Promethean figure is rising up at the dawn who will move west and perhaps challenge the Judge, although we do not actually know that. That would be the only thing that might keep the Judge from being immortal. (10)

Bloom's argument that the epilogue positions the man to challenge the Judge is in partial accordance with my own interpretation. Yet, it is through the historicizing process of constructing a fence that the man will confront him. Thus, frontier history serves to reinforce the apocalyptic resonances threaded throughout the novel.

Thus, my reading of the epilogue sheds an optimistic light on *Blood Meridian's* otherwise relentlessly nihilistic narrative. Instead of ending with the immortal dance of Judge Holden, McCarthy suggests an end to his rule through the construction of a fence. That said, casting this particular time in American south-west history as an antidote to Holden's dystopia is problematic. The arrival of modernity into the frontier subverted ideas of the west as a mythic and uncharted space. Holden even articulates this himself in his final confrontation with the kid. He says, "I tell you this. As war becomes dishonored and its nobility called into question those honorable men who recognize the sanctity of blood will become excluded from the dance, which is the warrior's right, and thereby will the dance become a false dance and the dancers false dancers" (329). McCarthy's next published novel *All the Pretty Horses* suggests this transformation of the frontier is responsible for the disappearance of cowboy romance. *No Country for Old Men* violently reinforces this idea.

Yet, despite what comes after the apocalypse, *Blood Meridian's* narrative still moves towards a rupture in human history that will bring about a significantly transformed world. In this respect, Judge Holden's propagation of war and his desire to drown the frontier in anarchic violence is interrupted by an eschatology that promises something better.

## **Chapter Two: Apocalypse without hope in *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men***

“So it is also true that you may enclose the green prairies and plow up the sweet wildflowers, you may build towns and cities on sites once occupied by the cowboy’s dugout and branding pen, but always something of the fragrance of the romance of the early days will cling to the region which the bold range riders once called their own, to remind us of those picturesque days gone forever.”

(Edward Everett Dale, “The Romance of the Range” 21)

“You dont have so much time. We never have so much time as we think.”

(Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses* 194)

Looking back over the twentieth century it is not surprising attitudes towards eschatology began to shift from an optimistic biblically inclined belief that the end will entail divine salvation, to a secular and nihilistic dread of worldly cataclysm. In an attempt to “discern ... the historical phases of American literary apocalypse,” John R. May assesses twelve American novels that “reflect modes of apocalyptic reaction to three different phases of the American experience” (201). The third phase, taking place after 1950, is a time “of cold-war tension, of the proliferation of nuclear potential, of the exploration of space. It is, in short, a period of technological plenty amid mythological poverty” (206). This technological

proliferation spurred anxieties regarding the future – especially with the millennium looming – and exacerbated fears the world will not end at the hands of God, but through nuclear weaponry, climate change or war. The revelation at the end of history will not be the arrival of the divine, but an entropic collapse into nothingness.

In my previous chapter, I read *Blood Meridian* within a biblical apocalyptic framework in order to articulate a pattern of hope in a seemingly nihilistic revision of western expansion. The novel ends with an enigmatic figure moving across the frontier with a two-handed implement, laying the foundation for a fence. I argued that this process is the apocalyptic transformation Judge Holden tries to resist through his violence. However, this transformation is realized in *All the Pretty Horses* with its representation of landscape ironically bereft of the carnage, anarchy and death that characterised *Blood Meridian*'s frontier. Instead, the Texas-Mexico border is eerily quiet and barren: “[t]hey rode till noon and past noon. There was nothing along the road save the country it traversed and there was nothing in the country at all” (57). Although in this novel an apocalyptic attitude re-emerges, it lacks the optimism intrinsic in traditional biblical eschatology. Set in the 1950s, *All the Pretty Horses* responds to the frontier's modernization with dread and despair. The protagonist, John Grady Cole, aware that something is “happen[ing] to country” (299), is anxious over the “darkening land, the world to come” (302). This apocalyptic nihilism continues more forcefully in *No Country for Old Men*, a Texas noir set against the backdrop of a proliferating drug trade. The novel's protagonist, Ed Tom Bell, is an aging Sheriff who wearily sees little hope in the future of humankind.

While these two novels operate within different genres, their attitude to the apocalypse moves along the same trajectory: the telos of history will not entail spiritual and worldly renewal, but instead an entropic end without redemption. I intend to read both novels from this perspective, which will allow an elucidation of McCarthy's approach to history,

modernity and landscape. In my third chapter, I will argue that *The Road* is a culmination of the eschatological line in these two novels. However, while I suggest *The Road* promises hope after obliteration, this does not obviate the excessive pessimism that concludes both *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men*.

### **1. *All the Pretty Horses***

*All the Pretty Horses* marks a significant shift in tone from *Blood Meridian*, abandoning the mindless violence of McCarthy's first western in favour of an elegiac coming of age tale in the tradition of a *Bildungsroman*. The novel concerns the disappearance of the cowboy in the wake of an increasingly urbanised American society, and the attempts of the protagonist, John Grady Cole, to resist it. He does this by heading south-west into Mexico, where he hopes that one can still maintain a pastoral lifestyle unencumbered. What John Grady discovers down there, however, is a world also subject to change, and its refusal to accommodate him dispels whatever compulsion he had to reject the coming darkness. At the end of the novel he comes across "indians camped on the western plains ... They stood and watched him pass and watched him vanish upon that landscape solely because he was passing. Solely because he would vanish" (301). Failing his quest, John Grady is absorbed into the landscape like the Native Americans slaughtered a hundred years ago by the Glanton gang.<sup>1</sup>

In *All the Pretty Horses*, modernity threatens the cowboy lifestyle through the arrival of the barbed wire fence and the railroad track. Lois Parkinson Zamora sees this proliferation of technology in the twentieth century as inspiring a string of American apocalyptic novels that

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<sup>1</sup> The parallel that McCarthy draws between the disappearance of the Native Americans and the cowboy seems to be deliberately ironic considering the events of *Blood Meridian*. However, the seriousness in which McCarthy represents John Grady's tragedy at the end of *All the Pretty Horses* makes ambiguous his true intent. Either way, it remains problematic to ignore the violent history of the American West. This issue reappears in *No Country for Old Men* when Sheriff Bell paints an all too idealistic past.

envision an end without redemption. For Zamora, this entropic apocalypse is “far more pessimistic than conventional apocalyptic eschatology, for the anthromorphism of traditional apocalypse, with its implicit sense of a purposeful history responding to human as well as to divine actions, yields to the bleak mechanism of a purely physical world” (52). Klaus R. Scherpe reiterates the pessimism of modern eschatology, arguing that “[t]he historical, philosophical, and theological power of the apocalypse to conjure up images of the end, in order to make life more meaningful, seems to be exhausted” (95). The dread of a post-apocalyptic world without the arrival of God to rescue the faithful and punish the wicked yields a desire to return to the past. Krishan Kumar suggests that

[i]n our time, modernity’s progressiveness has been called severely into question. Its dynamism and open-endedness, its lack of an overarching system of values, now seem more of a threat than a promise. The postmodernist retreat is one response. Postmodernity flattens time; it solves the problem of the future by simply denying the relevance of concepts of ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’. It denounces modernity’s belief in progress and attacks its faith in science and technology. To that extent it echoes the cultural conservatism of the earlier part of the century. (210)

However, the post-modern world “refuses to replace modernity with anything; this denial of an alternative is indeed its principle characteristic” (Kumar 210). Thus, we cannot escape the nihilistic fatalism that secular eschatology proposes. This particular kind of apocalyptic mode, however, does share one significant attribute with biblical eschatology: history is teleological. Yet, instead of inspiring hope, this recti linear movement of history only exacerbates anxieties regarding the end. Change is ultimately “for the worse. Time increases entropy, destroying order and structure until a point is reached when time is conceived of standing still” (Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* 59).

What this modern apocalypse meant for the cowboy was his disappearance. Marshall W. Fishwick asserts that “there had been two decades in which the cowboy could roam for hundreds of miles with no fences to hamper him or his herd. By 1951 those days were as distant as speculation over the morals of Grover Cleveland and the feasibility of eating tomatoes” (95). Unlike the savage and nomadic scalp-hunters of *Blood Meridian*, the cowboy in popular culture embodies traditional American values such as individualism, rugged masculinity and a connection with the wilderness. He “quickens young America’s belief in personal guts, integrity, and ingenuity, and the movies about him are a never-ending course in citizenship and the American way of life” (Fishwick 92). He symbolized the limitless space of the frontier, and was loyal to no laws or codes other than his own. Thus it is perhaps unsurprising that when the frontier faded “the cowboy, [though] still around physically, faded with the frontier” (Frantz and Ernest Choate Jr 69). Modernity impinged on the landscape, rapidly collapsing free and open space through its demarcation of the west. For Larry McMurtry “the Western experience has demonstrated ... the astonishing speed with which things can change ... A cowboy of 1866 saw the virgin land as one great expanse ... [he] would have had to be very prescient to imagine that most of that land would be cut up and fenced before he was even middle aged” (188 – 189). The barbwire fence, in particular, was the most potent symbol of change. It divided an expanse of ostensibly limitless land, significantly restricting the cowboy’s freedom of movement.<sup>2</sup> This transformation dispelled romantic ideas surrounding the western landscape. Frederick Jackson Turner’s announcement of the frontier’s closure

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<sup>2</sup> Joe B. Frantz and Julian Ernest Choate, Jr suggest the harsh and arid landscape could only be tamed by the utilization of technology. “In November, 1886 ... snow fell so deeply upon the plains that in places the cattle could not get through to the grass ... From that time forward ... a completely new, reasonably ordered approach was taken to the ranching industry. Ranching, like any other long-range industry, began to seek and find formulas for survival against all sorts of exigencies, and began also to take on some of the aspects of modern business procedure. It was better business but decidedly less picturesque” (66 - 67).

inflected Western representation with the more grim tones of determinism.

The closure that came with the completion of the imperial project left everything accounted for; and the work of naturalism was not only to make use of this situation in order to show that the classical American narrative of free individuals in free space was a faulty paradigm; but also to complain that the energy of empire had made precisely this paradigm impossible. (Lawlor 45)

Through these various processes, it is easy to see apocalyptic overtones reverberating across the west. It is “no longer a pastoral land in which one can escape the pressures of urbanization and industrialization; instead it is a theme park, a place where middle-class Americans take their families to Disneyland” (Sickles and Oxby 348). This erasure of the frontier’s open space “fostered an extensive sense of loss in U.S. public discourse” (Lawlor 41) and this informs much of the elegiac tone in McCarthy’s border fiction.

*(i) The eruption of modernity*

*All the Pretty Horses* begins with the funeral of John Grady’s grandfather. This is perhaps appropriate in a novel that mourns the disappearance of the cowboy. Reinforcing this disappearance is the rejection by John Grady’s parents of ranch life in favour of the city. His father lives alone, afflicted with an illness from his time in the Second World War. Although he and John Grady share a close bond, the father is helpless and drowning in apocalyptic pessimism. “People don’t feel safe no more,” he tells his son. “We’re like the Comanches was two hundred years ago. We don’t know what’s goin’ to show up here come daylight. We don’t even know what color they’ll be” (25 – 26). He has relinquished all his power to his unsympathetic ex-wife. “He signed ever paper they put in front of him” a lawyer tells John



Grady. “Never lifted a hand to save himself” (17). The impotency of his father prefigures a shift of gender dynamics in this changing world.

John Grady’s mother is given only a couple of scenes, yet she remains significant through her desertion of the family ranch in order to become a stage actress in the city. She is cold and unsympathetic to John Grady’s desire to take care of the ranch himself. She tells him “[t]here’s not any money [in running the ranch]. This place has barely paid expenses for twenty years. There hasn’t been a white person worked here since before the war ... You’re being ridiculous. You have to go to school” (15). More than any other character, Mrs. Grady speaks for modernity and its ability to disrupt the rhythms of John Grady’s pastoral life. Furthermore, she subverts archetypal representations of women in western narratives. Traditionally, writes Larry McMurtry, “Marlboro country is a woman-free zone. Sometimes there is a cabin in the snow, with a wreath of smoke coming out of the chimney ... if there is a woman ... cooking for her man, we don’t see her” (186). Thus, Mrs. Grady’s autonomy is not only indicative of the changing world, but also the destabilization of perceived gender roles. Patrick W. Shaw suggests that “[t]he girls and woman [in *All the Pretty Horses*] do not emerge from the androcentric narratives with attributes enough to define them as distinct personae [but collectively the] feminine presence ... resonates at frequencies no one of the females could cause individually” (“Feminine Presence” 258). I would argue however that the female characters in the novel are each given enough autonomy to shape the plot. Even seemingly peripheral characters, such as John Grady’s girlfriend Mary Catherine who dumps him, tellingly, for a boy with a car, demonstrate this reversal of power. The women in *All the Pretty Horses* dictate John Grady’s movement south-west into Mexico and then back to Texas, disillusioned, humiliated and alone.

John Grady tries to comprehend his mother's choices by covertly attending one of her plays.<sup>3</sup> Believing that "life on a cattle ranch in west Texas is the second best thing to dyin and goin to heaven" (17), he fails to derive from her play "something in the story ... to tell him about the way the world was or was becoming" (22). This failure to accrue insight from art also occurs earlier in the novel when, referring to an oil painting of horses, John Grady asks his grandfather what kind of horses were they. "[H]is grandfather looked up from his plate at the painting as if he'd never seen it before and he said those are picturebook horses and went on eating" (16). The affinities between art and urban life means this inability to connect with either the play or the oil painting is unsurprising. This dissonance is reinforced when John Grady attends the theatre house: "[a]t intermission he rose and put on his hat ... and rolled a cigarette and stood smoking it with one boot jacked back against the wall behind him. He was not unaware of the glances that drifted his way from the theatregoers" (21). This difference only serves to fuel his hostility towards not only the changing world, but also his mother. He bitterly refers to Mrs. Grady simply as 'she' and refuses to re-establish a relationship with her despite the behest of his father.

Mrs. Grady's embrace of modern life prefigures a more malevolent apocalyptic sign: the eruption of the machine into nature. From the first page, McCarthy disrupts the naturalness of the Wild West with violent machinery. Watching over the landscape, brooding over his grandfather's death, John Grady's reflections are suddenly interrupted by a coming train:

Dark and cold and no wind and a thin gray reef beginning along the eastern  
rim of the world. He walked out on the prairie and stood holding his hat like

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<sup>3</sup> John Blair recognizes an irony John Grady's inability to comprehend his mother's choice. He argues that "her motivations are essentially no different than his, and what she does is no more or no less futile than what he does" (303). He suggests that what drives John Grady's mother towards the city is no less valid or evil than what drives John Grady himself towards Mexico.

some supplicant to the darkness over them all and he stood there for a long time. As he turned to go he heard the train ... It came boring out of the east like some ribald satellite of the coming sun howling and bellowing in the distance and the long light of the headlamp running through the tangled mesquite brakes and creating out of the night the endless fenceline down the dead straight right of way and sucking it back again wire and post mile on mile into the darkness. (4)

The arrival of technology into the wilderness is a common trope of nineteenth and twentieth century American literature according to Leo Marx, whose *The Machine in the Garden* examines the relationship between America's pastoral ideal and its rapid technological development. Marx suggests that "[m]uch of the singular quality of this era is conveyed by the trope of the interrupted idyll. The locomotive ... is the leading symbol of the new industrial power. It appears in the woods, suddenly shattering the harmony of the green hollow, like a presentiment of history bearing down on the American asylum" (27). The train disrupting John Grady's quiet contemplation seems to be a direct reference to Marx's 'interrupted idyll,' symbolizing the chaos that will leave him disillusioned and alone by the novel's end.

This intrusion of the machine into the frontier disrupts John Grady's fixed sense of place and, consequently, his sense of himself. Ashley Bourne, looking at this relationship between landscape and identity, writes that "[t]he landscape is possessed by memory, and the past reverberates across the terrain. This sense of the past as embedded in the landscape offers the possibility of a collective memory that is located in the physical world, distinct from what is contained in the human mind" (119). Thus, the transformation of the frontier – whether it is through fences or trains – disrupts John Grady's vision of the past. The solution, therefore, is to search for a "sense of 'rootedness' in the landscape that seemingly equates

with their deep desire for a stable, knowable identity” (Bourne 113). However, because modernity impinges on the wilderness, John Grady will keep searching for that idyllic space until he realizes he has no space left. This will also be the case for Llewellyn Moss, who in *No Country for Old Men*, is shot dead in the confines of a motel room.

*(ii) John Grady and old codes in a New World*

This desire for stability is also a resistance to the modernizing world, and thus the reason why John Grady and his friend Rawlins head to Mexico – a place that they believe is “emblematic of some lost time or imagined ‘Old West’” (Campbell, *Cultures of the New American West* 23). In this sense, the cowboys are attempting to move back into the past in order to claim an Edenic space. James D. Lilley suggests that this quest into Mexico is a “repeating of the American project itself, looking for a new beginning that re-establishes itself with a forgotten past” (275). Thus, both John Grady and Rawlins re-enact the lives of their forefathers, indulging quite consciously in their cowboy roles, eventually blurring “the line between game and reality” (Kollin 573). They call each other ‘son’ and ‘cousin,’ and claim to be outlaws (“we robbed a bank” (34)) when meeting strangers on the road. While John Grady comes to take this role quite seriously, Rawlins is quick to return to the world of rationality and realism when confronted with danger. This contrast between the two plays out when Jimmy Blevins, a reckless and violent young cowboy whose anarchism recalls the kid, asks for their help after his horse is stolen. Compelled by a heroic code, and an unwavering commitment to justice, John Grady is unhesitant in helping Blevins despite the risk of imprisonment or death. Rawlins however, would rather reject the young cowboy’s request because of the inevitable consequences. He says “ever dumb thing I ever done in my life there was a decision I made that got me into it. It was never the dumb thing. It was always some choice I’d made before

it” (79). This very philosophy will be articulated later by the Dueña Alfonsa to justify her rejection of John Grady as a suit for Alejandra.

The cowboy lifestyle is not as seductive to Rawlins as it is to John Grady, and he only agrees to help out of devotion to his friend. Gail Moore Morrison attributes Rawlins’s hesitation to submerge himself into a cowboy role as emotional immaturity and self-centeredness. For Morrison, “Rawlins is a voice for non-engagement and convention, for self-interest and safety. He is ultimately the voice of childhood and so is sent home, bloodied, but little wiser for his adventure” (182). Her criticism stems from her admiration of John Grady, who she sees as “a man of action, of passion, of character and of honor” (182) which is worthier than hesitation and caution. However, while the values John Grady holds close to his chest are heroic, his idealism ultimately proves to be his downfall. The attributes that Morrison champions, particularly his willingness to help Blevins, only contributes to his alienation and disillusionment at the novel’s end. Rawlins’s rationality allows him to accept their failure at maintaining an authentic life in Mexico, and move forward as Grady stalls.

Thus, to discern John Grady’s pessimism regarding the changing world, one must analyze how his cowboy values inform his development through the novel. Although *All the Pretty Horses* ostensibly belongs to a tradition of American fiction that depicts young men overcoming obstacles in order to achieve moral growth, I would suggest that his journey reacts against this archetypal narrative. His movement south-west resists the necessary obstacles John Grady would have to face in order to develop into a man. Instead, the “journey down into Mexico [is] an elegy to the Old West, an attempt to move backwards in time to a place where the codes of the Old West are still valorized” (Lilley 274). John Blair takes a similar approach in his suggestion that *All the Pretty Horses* is not a traditional *Bildungsroman*. However, Blair argues that John Grady already has the necessary skills and values at the beginning of the novel, and his journey into Mexico actually involves exercising

this experience and knowledge in a hostile world. Blair writes, “[John Grady’s maturity] requires intersection with the Other that is our own potential, the lapsarian moment that brings not growth so much as completion, not knowledge so much as wholeness [in order to] understand his own futility ... yet continue to live according to the values that for him make his life an authentic one” (304). Where Blair and I diverge is on the perception of John Grady’s particular values. I contend that the heroic code he tries to live by is inauthentic, is determined by a cowboy mythology incommensurate with reality, and that this is what ultimately spurs the novel’s tragedy.

What forces John Grady to confront the illusory nature of his heroic code is his experience with violence. Although the novel is more subdued when compared to *Blood Meridian*, the moments where violence does emerge are perhaps as vividly rendered as anything McCarthy has written on the subject. When John Grady and Rawlins are sent to the Saltillo prison, their relatively peaceful lives are irrevocably disturbed by the carnage they face there. In what seems to be an echo of *Blood Meridian*’s depiction of the frontier, the prison was “a bedrock of depravity and violence where in an egalitarian absolute every man was judged by a single standard and that was his readiness to kill” (182). Jay Ellis wonders why the “scope of violent freedom ... has narrowed” in the frontier with the arrival of *All the Pretty Horses* (181). Yet, the Saltillo prison reveals that violence has not so much been narrowed as it has been relocated. Time in the prison forces both John Grady and Rawlins to abandon civil codes and resort to baser instincts in order to survive. “They slept and in the morning it all began again. They fought back to back and picked each other up and fought again. At noon Rawlins could not chew. They’re goin to kill us, he said” (182).

This daily struggle for survival culminates in a knife fight between John Grady and a young cuchillero. Connecting with his inner primal self, John Grady kills his attacker by bringing “his knife up from the floor and [sinking] it into the cuchillero’s heart. He sank it

into his heart and snapped the handle sideways and broke the blade off in him” (201). Although he kills in self-defence, he finds himself haunted by it for the remainder of the novel. “He’d of done it to you,” Rawlins says in an attempt to reassure him. “You dont need to try and make it right,” John Grady responds. “It is what it is” (215). Disturbed by his capacity for violence, John Grady’s struggle to morally vindicate his actions destabilizes the cowboy identity he has constructed for himself. Thus, Mexico does not offer the longed for in which John Grady can live a pastoral life. “There can be in a man some evil,” the prison warden tells him. “But we dont think it is his own evil ... No. Evil is a true thing in Mexico. It goes about on its own legs. Maybe some day it will come to visit you. Maybe it already has” (194 - 195). In an attempt to absolve his guilt, John Grady confesses to a benevolent judge after he is acquitted of the criminal accusations levelled against him. “I guess what I wanted to say first of all,” he tells the judge, “was that it kindly bothered me in court what you said. It was like I was in the right about everthing and I dont feel that way” (290). However, despite the judge’s assurance “there’s nothing wrong with [him]” (293), John Grady is not appeased. What troubles him is that his self-perception as heroic and chivalrous, as somebody who abides by the ideal of goodness, has collapsed. He cannot continue living as a cowboy if he is unable to reconcile his violence with the man he aspires to be.

*(iii) Alfonsa: History as a puppet show*

John Grady’s failure to live an authentic life in accordance with cowboy codes speaks to the machinations of history, particularly its disregard for humankind in its inexorable movement forward. In two passages, McCarthy explores his philosophy of history through conversations between John Grady and the hacienda matriarch Dueña Alfonsa. Born in Mexico, but educated in Europe, Alfonsa offers a unique insight into her country and its role in the larger scheme of history. Her manipulation of her granddaughter Alejandra sets off a string of

events that leads to John Grady's expulsion from the ranch. In this regard, she mirrors Mrs. Grady through a demonstration of her power to shape the young cowboy's journey. Yet, perhaps more interestingly, Alfonsa also draws parallels with Judge Holden through her cultural background and philosophically inclined rhetoric.<sup>4</sup> She invests the ranch with "oldworld ties and ... antiquity and tradition" (132). However, unlike Holden, Alfonsa does not operate on pure malevolence even though her actions are designed to demonstrate her ruthlessness and limited compassion for those "people to whom [bad] things happen" (240). Instead, her various manipulations intend to divert future bad luck for her family. She tells John Grady that "[w]hatever my appearance may suggest, I am not a particularly oldfashioned woman" (135). She would prefer Alejandra to "make a very different marriage from the one which her society is bent upon demanding of her" (242). While John Grady would seem to suit such a requirement, Alfonsa sees his idealism and bad luck as conspiring against him.

McCarthy elucidates this point by articulating Alfonsa's perception of history, which she sees as "a puppet show. But when one looks behind the curtain and traces the strings upwards he finds they terminate in the hands of yet other puppets, themselves with their own strings which traced upward in turn, and so on" (231). This image of puppet masters being controlled themselves conjures a line of cause and effect that is staunchly deterministic: what happens now is shaped by all events preceding it. This theory of history is played out in a comedic episode when Blevins gives a rundown of his family's bad luck with lightning:

My granddaddy was killed in a minebucket in West Virginia it run down in  
the hole a hunnerd and eighty feet to get him ... fried em like bacon. My  
daddy's older brother was blowed out of a derrick in the Baston Field ...

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<sup>4</sup> As with *Blood Meridian*'s The Judge, Alfonsa serves as a contrast to the 'less educated' cowboy protagonists and it is this contrast that requires her opposition to them.



Great uncle on my mother's side ... got killed on a horse and it never singed  
a hair on that horse ... I got a cousin aint but four years oldern me was struck  
down in his own yard comin from the barn. (69)

Consequently, Alfonsa adopts a nihilistic attitude towards history. For her, "it is supposed to be true that those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it. I dont believe knowing can save us" (239). This attitude responds to Zamora's entropic apocalypse, in which are absent "the anthropomorphic embodiments of moral values, the Christ and the Antichrist, the Whore of Babylon and the Bride, *symbols of the ethical dialectic that is understood as the motivating force of time*" (my emphasis 55).

Her rejection of John Grady, interestingly, comes from the failure of her own idealism as a young woman and her relationship with the revolutionaries Francisco and Gustavo Madero. She recounts the history of the Madero brothers and their successful overthrow of the Mexican dictator Diaz. Although Francisco becomes president, "[h]is trust in the basic goodness of mankind became his undoing" (237) and he and his brother are forced out of power by a coup before being executed. Gustavo, whom Alfonsa loved, suffered in particular a ruthless and violent fate: "[a mob] pushed him and struck him. They burned him. When he begged ... one of them came forward with a pick and pried out his good eye ... Someone came forward with a revolver and put it to his head fired but the crowd jostled his arm and the shot tore away his jaw" (237). What she has gleaned from these events is that idealism inevitably leads to mindless violence, for the only constant in history is "greed and foolishness and a love of blood" (239). And so Alfonsa "becomes entrenched in the intractable society she once detested" (Owens 91).

The portrait of history Alfonsa paints denies John Grady the capacity to make choices that will allow him to take Alejandra as a wife. He is subservient to the violence of history, cursed by his own idealism and failure to accept the world as it is and is becoming. After his adventures in Mexico, he returns to his home in Texas where he attends a funeral for his Abuela. As with his grandfather's funeral, this underlines the elegiac tenor that runs through the novel. When Rawlins, who has found a job at an oilrig, tells John Grady Texas "is still good country," John Grady agrees but says "it aint my country" (299). *All the Pretty Horses* ends with the disillusioned cowboy riding

with the sun coppering his face and the red wind blowing out of the west  
across the evening land and the small desert birds flew chittering among the  
dry bracken and horse and rider and horse passed on and their long shadows  
passed in tandem like the shadow of a single being. Passed and paled into  
the darkening land, the world to come. (302)

In this passage, McCarthy conjures the mythological image of the cowboy riding across the Great Plains before disappearing into 'the darkening land.' However, the romance of this passage is undermined by all that has come before it. John Grady's passing is apocalyptic, prefiguring the end of history as modernity continues to shape the frontier. In *No Country for Old Men*, set a few decades after *All the Pretty Horses*,<sup>5</sup> the landscape is completely emptied of its romantic and mythological resonances, and thus the nihilism of modern day apocalyptic though is tellingly evident.

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<sup>5</sup> One of Anton Chigurh's coins is dated "nineteen fifty eight [and thus it's] been travelling twenty-two years to get here" (56), indicating that the date of the novel is 1980.

## 2. *No Country for Old Men*

“I always thought that when I got older that God would sort of come into my life in some way. He didnt. I dont blame him.”

(Cormac McCarthy, *No Country for Old Men* 267)

A lean crime thriller set in the 1980's, *No Country for Old Men* renders the pessimism of secular apocalyptic thought even more forcefully than *All the Pretty Horses*. Centred on a fugitive who has stumbled upon, and made off with, two million dollars in of drug money, McCarthy discards the elegiac tone of his Border Trilogy and concocts a narrative replete with gun-toting action and stoic straight talking tough guys. The novel's divergence in genre from the author's previous western fiction initially creates difficulties when read in conjunction with *All the Pretty Horses*.<sup>6</sup> However, both novels essentially deal with the same question: how does a man of the past navigate a changing and increasingly hostile world?

Sheriff Ed Tom Bell articulates these anxieties through italicised monologues that begin each chapter. These passages encapsulate the novel's apocalyptic attitude by lamenting society's degeneration and idealizing a morally conservative past. This has led Lydia R. Cooper to argue that Bell represents morality in a world otherwise bereft of it. Thus, his monologues offer a “metaphysical counterpoint to the nihilistically-inclined narrative events of the novel” (40). However, in these particular sections, Bell is speaking from a position of defeat. From the first monologue, he has already quit his role as Sheriff and given up on the chase for Chigurh. In this context, his ruminations on the good old days take on a decidedly

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<sup>6</sup> *No Country for Old Men* began life as a screenplay, but was shelved after being rejected by movie producers. Thus, McCarthy turned it into a novel that was, ironically, adapted into a critically acclaimed film.

pessimistic slant. Bell is not desiring or reaffirming morality, but mourning its disappearance. He is under no illusions that God will come and deliver the good people from Chigurh's violence.

It is in this context that I will argue that *No Country for Old Men* exacerbates *All the Pretty Horses*' pessimism through its representation of an American frontier that has been emptied of its romance. In its place McCarthy presents the malevolent and philosophically astute Anton Chigurh: a ruthless assassin who announces the approaching end with the blast of his shotgun. Finally, I will offer a closer analysis of Bell's monologues in light of this new world and suggest they function as a form of retreat similar to John Grady's escape southwest into Mexico. As with *All the Pretty Horses*, the novel ends without the promise of apocalyptic renewal. Instead, McCarthy depicts a collapse into entropy of which the only solution is a nostalgic dream "in all that dark and all that cold" (309).

*(i) The disappearance of the frontier*

While *No Country for Old Men* distinguishes itself from McCarthy's previous western fiction through its prominent use of small town settings, we are given a brief glimpse of the western frontier early in the novel when Llewellyn Moss hunts antelope.

The sun was up less than an hour and the shadow of the ridge and the datilla and the rocks fell far out across the floodplain below him. Somewhere out there was the shadow of Moss himself. He lowered the binoculars and sat studying the land. Far to the south the raw mountains of Mexico. The breaks of the river. To the west the baked terracotta terrain of the running borderlands. (8)

The minimalistic and straightforward description of the frontier is a significant contrast to the highly stylistic *All the Pretty Horses* and, especially, *Blood Meridian*. Gone are the biblical and mythological allusions and use of archaic vocabulary. While explanations for this shift in style could be attributed to the choice of genre, I would suggest it is more complicated than that. In continuance of the apocalyptic pulse that runs through his western novels, it seems that the stripped down prose of *No Country for Old Men* points towards the disappearance of a once romantic frontier.<sup>7</sup> Further descriptions of the landscape appear to support this. When Moss looks up from his binoculars he sees “[t]he pale orange dust that hung in the windless morning light [which] grew faint and then it too was gone” (10). Later, he passes “rocks ... etched with pictographs perhaps a thousand years old. The man who drew them hunters like himself. Of them there was no other trace” (11). From the opening pages, there seems to be an emphasis on the disappearance of an older world, leaving behind only remnants of the past.

This disappearance is further enforced by what Moss discovers in the wilderness while hunting antelope: a circle of trucks and bullet-ridden bodies strewn across the desert floor. Again, this recalls Leo Marx’s “interrupted idyll” (27) through the eruption of the mechanical into natural space. However, this is not merely a passing train or a line of barbwire fence. The massacre, a result of a drug deal gone wrong, indicates a more malignant and violent depiction of the machine. It has transformed the desert into a site of transaction instigated by large faceless corporations.<sup>8</sup> While this theme continues from *All the Pretty Horses*, *No Country for Old Men* is less sentimental about this loss. The disappearance of the romantic frontier is a matter of fact; only Sheriff Bell laments, and even he is under no illusion the past

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<sup>7</sup> Dianne C. Luce argues that the word vanish “is a word repeated over and over through the [Border] trilogy, sometimes in passages of portent but more often in mundane contexts which reduce vanishing to a mere fact of life in which the persistence of the vanished is never called into question” (164).

<sup>8</sup> McCarthy makes a direct reference to the puppet masters behind the string of violence in the novel through Chigurh: “[h]e could think of no reason for the transponder sending unit to be in the hotel. He ruled out Moss because he thought Moss was almost certainly dead. That left the police. Or some agent of the Matacumbe Petroleum Group” (171).

can be reclaimed. Other characters such as Anton Chigurh, and Moss himself, are seemingly unaffected by this corruption of the natural. When Moss comes across the massacre, his first reaction is to scavenge for firearms, of which he has an intimate knowledge. His stoic response initially seems to be an evocation of the archetypal emotionally guarded cowboy. Yet even John Grady is disturbed by the violence he confronts in Mexico. This has led Jay Ellis to suggest that “Moss’s character is ... a parody of the hard-boiled hero for a Young Man genre novel” (235), apparent by his fetish for weapons and his tough guy persona. It is certainly true that McCarthy does not attempt to paint a realistic portrait of Moss; however, I believe that this stoicism reflects a general feeling of disillusionment in the novel over the coming darkness. The inefficacy of the natural landscape to provide an alternative to the rapidly developing and malevolent modern world is not mourned, but accepted as a grim reality that people like Moss are unable to change.

Tellingly, after Moss goes on the run, the novel’s wilderness setting gives way to progressively limiting urban locales. In an attempt to elude his pursuers, he takes refuge in motel rooms across Texas. This is an inversion of *Blood Meridian*’s sprawling desert landscape, in which the sheer expanse of the frontier invited anarchic orgies of violence and death. *No Country for Old Men*, however, is claustrophobic through its use of enclosed settings such as hospital rooms, cars, trailers and motels. The result is a stifling and anxious atmosphere. Consider this scene in a motel room:

[Moss] sat on the bed thinking things over. He got up and looked out the window at the parking lot and he went into the bathroom and got a glass of water and came back and sat on the bed again ... He got the shotgun out of the bag and laid it on the bed and turned on the bedside lamp. He went to the door and turned off the overhead light and came back and stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling ... He got up and went into the bathroom

and pulled the chain on the light over the sink and looked at himself in the mirror ... He took a leak and then switched off the light and went back and sat on the bed. (107 - 109)

Like an animal trapped in a cage, Moss wanders back and forth over the same enclosed space dreading whatever threat that awaits him. The repetition of the word 'bed' not only emphasises cyclical movement, but it also subverts its connotations of sleep and relaxation. It reinforces the malignancy of small spaces, essentially collapsing the capacity for freedom of movement Moss needs to stay alive.

The use of small spaces also informs the novel's violence. Consider this passage in another motel room where Chigurh takes down some Mexican hit men who are searching for the stolen money:

[Chigurh] stood listening at the door. Then he punched out the lock cylinder with the airgun and kicked open the door ... A Mexican in a green guayabera [reached] for a small machinegun beside him. Chigurh shot him three times ... He snapped on the light and stepped out of the doorway and stood with his back to the outside wall ... He stepped into the [bathroom] and fired two loads through the standing door and another through the wall and stepped out again. (103 - 104)

The violence in this passage is controlled and methodical, but also quick and efficient. As Chigurh proceeds further into the room, he closes off potential escape routes for his targets. This is a significant contrast to *Blood Meridian's* depiction of violence, in which the open space of the frontier invited a kind of frenzied massacre. Again, language serves to highlight the difference between the anarchy of the Glanton gang's skirmishes and the quiet efficiency of Chigurh's kills.

*(ii) Chigurh and Determinism*

Perhaps the most effective spokesperson for apocalyptic despair is Anton Chigurh, one of the three central characters in the novel. He is an assassin hired to take down Llewellyn Moss and retrieve the stolen two million dollars, mercilessly killing whoever gets in his way. His weapon of choice is a cattle gun, a device connected to “a hose that run(s) down the side of his sleeve,” which itself is attached to “one of them oxygen tanks for emphysema or whatever” (5). It fires an electric bolt through his victim’s foreheads, leaving “a round hole ... from which ... blood [bubbles] and runs down” (7). Ellis notes the apocalyptic resonance of this mark, suggesting it gives Chigurh’s victims a “symbolic third eye” (229) that allows them to see the truth, or Revelation, of the end. Before Chigurh kills a Mexican hit man he says “[d]ont look away. I want you to look at me” (122), as if he wants them to see and understand that he is death incarnate..

Because of his oxymoronic propensity to combine violence with philosophical rhetoric, some critics see Chigurh as a literary descendant of Judge Holden. Randy Boyagada argues that Chigurh’s “stun-gun stalking and coin-flipping nihilism ... seems to be an update on the apocalyptically evil Judge” (44). Benjamin Strong also identifies parallels between the two, even if Chigurh is “a more generous [and] more vacuous devil” (32). Comparisons are reinforced by Chigurh’s otherness. He is described as “faintly exotic” (112) with eyes “[b]lue as lapis. At once glistening and totally opaque. Like wet stones” (56), and his ethnically ambiguous name emphasises his lack of origin. Lydia R. Cooper suggests that “there is ... a niggling fear ... Chigurh just might be a walking, breathing personification of the Prince of Darkness ... [He] is not like Satan; at some level of the story, he just might *be* Satan” (46). Additionally, like Holden, Chigurh is a philosopher and will often draw his victims into dialectical conversations regarding the nature free choice. However, their ideologies



ultimately diverge on this particular issue. While the Judge believes in control over nature in order to “take charge of the world [and] dictate the terms of his own fate” (199), Chigurh argues that

[e]very moment in your life is a turning and every one a choosing.

Somewhere you made a choice. All followed to this. The accounting is scrupulous. The shape is drawn. No line can be erased ... A person’s path through the world seldom changes and even more seldom will it change abruptly. And the shape of your path was visible from the beginning. (259)

His assertion that history is deterministic corresponds with the traditional apocalyptic belief in linear predetermined time, envisioning a clear beginning, middle and end. Chigurh’s philosophy is ultimately nihilistic because it denies humankind the autonomy to make free choice and reject whatever path the universe has laid out for them. This echoes the ideology of Alfonsa’s father, who sees the course of history originating from, and thus being determined by, a coin toss. Chigurh also employs a coin to demonstrate his argument. The first time he does this in the novel is with the owner of a gas station. After flipping the coin he asks the owner to choose heads or tails without specifying “what it is [he] stand(s) to win” (56). The owner guesses correctly and Chigurh gives him the coin in celebration, and warns that

[a]nything can be an instrument ... Small things. Things you wouldnt even notice. They pass from hand to hand. People dont pay attention. And then one day there’s an accounting. And after that nothing is the same. Well, you say. It’s just a coin. For instance. Nothing special there. What could that be an instrument of? You see the problem. To separate the act from the thing.

As if the parts of some moment in history might be interchangeable with the parts of some other moment. (57)

In this speech, he puts forward a pattern of history that is unalterable, to the extent that objects themselves are assigned important roles. The coin, Chigurh tells the owner, has “been travelling twenty-two years to get here” (56) in order to play its part in determining whether he lives or dies. It is ironic then that Chigurh would use a coin to articulate his deterministic theory, since a coin toss is based on the theory of chance. However, by flipping the coin he actually reaffirms fate, the notion of chance is only there to perversely offer false hope “before the shroud drops, the darkness” (259).

This develops further towards the end of the novel when Chigurh goes after Moss’s wife Carla Jean out of no other reason than to fulfil a promise. Knowing he has come to kill her, Carla Jean pleads that he does not have to do this. Surprisingly, Chigurh is sympathetic and says “[n]one of this was your fault” (257). His regret suggests that while he propagates this deterministic philosophy, it is not something he necessarily agrees with. Thus, Chigurh is also denied the autonomy to change history and this, consequently, puts his killing in a different light. His violence is not the same as Holden’s anarchic dance, but determined by the needs of history. In spite of this, Chigurh offers Carla Jean a coin toss saying “[t]his is the best I can do” (258). When the coin decides she must die, she accuses Chigurh of relinquishing responsibility. She says, “[y]ou make it like it was the coin ... The coin didnt have no say. It was just you” (258). Chigurh, however, assigns equal agency to the coin explaining that he “got here the same way the coin did” (258). This particular worldview leaves no space for morality as human decisions to do right or wrong are determined by seemingly immutable factors, and fate is therefore inescapable. Before he kills her, Chigurh tries to make Carla Jean understand his case: “[t]his is the end. You can say that things could have turned out differently. That they could have been some other way. But what does that

mean? They are not some other way. They are this way. You're asking that I second say the world" (260).

McCarthy's exploration of determinism ultimately underlines the novel's greater concern, which is the nature of endings. *No Country for Old Men's* depiction of where the world is heading is not particularly optimistic, thus it is perhaps appropriate Chigurh emerges as a kind of apocalypticist, or "prophet of destruction" (4), announcing the coming darkness through his methodical and murderous devotion to fate. Yet, he too is not exempt from an ending as demonstrated by his materiality in the novel. He is nearly killed twice, first in a shootout with Moss and then in a car accident at the end. The latter incident leaves him with "[b]lood ... running into his eyes [as] he tried to think. He held his arm and turned it and tried to see how badly it was bleeding. If the median artery was severed. He thought not. His head was ringing. No pain. Not yet" (261). Additionally, midway through the narrative, after the shootout with Moss, Chigurh heals himself with "[e]psom salt solution and ... antibiotics" (165). These details serve to subvert notions of Chigurh as a supernatural force in the vein of Judge Holden by reaffirming his mortality.

In a conversation with fellow assassin Carson Wells, Chigurh tells him that "[g]etting hurt changed me ... Changed my perspective. I've moved on, in a way. Some things have fallen into place that were not there before" (173). He then explains that this realization began earlier, when he allowed a deputy sheriff to arrest him and take him into custody. "I think I wanted to see if I could extricate myself by an act of will. Because I believe that one can. That such a thing is possible. But it was a foolish thing to do. A vain thing to do" (174 - 175). This attempt to extricate himself from the path laid out for him further informs his regret over killing Carla Jean. It also suggests he was once not entirely convinced of his deterministic philosophy. However, events that forced him back on his path ultimately collapsed this doubt.

(iii) *Sheriff Bell and Nostalgia*

If Chigurh's philosophical determinism reinforces a pessimistic view of history in which humankind can only wait for the end to come, then Bell's monologues react against this by evoking a supposedly idyllic past while lamenting the world to come. Some critics read these monologues as a reflection of McCarthy's own social and political viewpoints. In a review for *The Nation*, William Deresiewicz argues that

[Bell] is clearly McCarthy's mouthpiece here, and so we find the erstwhile apostle of ignorance giving us chapter and verse about what to believe and how ... What Bell is confronting, we're told again and again, is a new kind of evil. Apparently the Old West, like the rest of human history, was just one big family ... McCarthy has forgotten that his critique of modernity is only a subset of his critique of humanity. (41)

Certainly, Bell's position as narrator might imply his political viewpoints correspond with that of the author. Deresiewicz and other critics assume that the monologues articulate the novel's theme, which is, ostensibly, the denigration of modern society. Lydia R. Cooper, however, suggests that these monologues merely function as one facet of a multi-layered narrative, and should be read as "*heteroglossia* – the coexistence of many narrative voices blending together, counterbalancing each other, decentralizing narrative authority" (41). Thus, the monologues reflect Bell's worldview without necessarily shaping the worldview of the novel or its author. This particular approach opens up many avenues for interpretation. I would suggest that Bell's pessimism towards the future, laced in his monologues, actually undermines his narrative authority and evokes the despairing and helpless attitude intrinsic in secular apocalyptic thought.

The majority of Bell's monologues involve recounting news stories or personal experiences that reaffirm his assertion the world is "going to hell in a handbasket" (4). For example, he remembers sending a teenage boy to the gas chamber for killing a fourteen-year-old girl. Unable to comprehend the killer's stoicism over his impending execution, Bell assumes he "was some new kind" of evil who knew he was going "to hell in fifteen minutes" and did not care (3). Other monologues describe "two boys [who] run into one another [and] set out ... travelin around the country killin people" (40) and a "couple out in California [renting] out rooms to old people and then kill em and bury em in the yard and cash their social security checks" (124). These stories foreshadow his incomprehension of Anton Chigurh: "when you encounter certain things in the world, the evidence of certain things, you realize you have come upon somethin that you may very well not be equal to and I think that this is one of them things" (299). Chigurh challenges Bell's relatively simple worldview – one of his first scenes involves easing an old woman's anxieties about her cat being stuck up in a tree – by not suggesting the presence of evil, as Bell infers, but by negating his usefulness as a Sheriff. Bell rejects his wife's consolation by saying "if you got a bad enough dog in your yard people will stay out of it. And they didnt" (299).

Kirsten Moana Thompson suggests that a series of apocalyptic crises in the twentieth century, including two world Wars, the Holocaust, and the Vietnam and Cold war, "gave rise to a culture of paranoia." Consequently, this "increased cultural conservatism and [a] (re)turn to fundamentalist religions" (7). Social anxieties over the state of the world reinforced a desire to return to the past, or reclaim values of the past to, ostensibly, better the future. This particular kind of reaction to nihilistic apocalyptic dread is what I see informing much of Bell's character in *No Country for Old Men*.

When a reporter asks Bell how he "let crime get so out of hand in [his] country," he responds: "it starts when you begin to overlook bad manners. Any time you quit hearin Sir

and Mam the end is pretty much in sight” (304). Although Jay Ellis suggests the line of humour running through McCarthy’s fiction has been “conterminously extinguished” with *No Country for Old Men* (290), I would argue that there is some degree of comic irony in the novel’s representation of Bell’s belief systems. To blame the supposed dissolution of morality and goodness on a lack of proper manners reduces the complexity of McCarthy’s depiction of human violence in all his preceding novels. Thus, I take this quote by Bell as revealing his idealization of the past, an idealization that undermines its authenticity. According to Bell, before the arrival of drugs and firearms, the worst things to happen in High Schools were “talkin in class and runnin in the hallways” (196). Violence was merely a “fistfight somewhere and you’d go to break [it] up and they’d offer to fight you” (38). These constant ruminations on the past serve as an obvious retreat from a comparatively nihilistic and blood soaked present. Yet this idyllic construction of the good old days is problematised when he makes a reference to colonial history, explaining that colonials having their wives “and children killed and scalped and gutted like fish [by Native Americans] has a tendency to make some people irritable” (195). Bell’s forgetting, or dismissal, of equivalent crimes against the Native Americans undermines his ability to reconstruct a past commensurate to reality.

In *All the Pretty Horses*, John Grady takes his horse to Mexico in order to avoid the changing world. Although he fails to resist the world to come, such expeditions could still be entertained because of the air of romance that lingered on the frontier. In Sheriff Bell’s time the western landscape, as I have argued, is bereft of this promise. As the opening pages reveal, heading west will not lead you away from the modern world but to a circle of trucks, scattered bullet ridden bodies, drugs and tainted cash. Thus, for Bell, the only retreat he can entertain is an imaginary escape into a nostalgically remembered past. Bell finally realizes this in his last monologue in which he describes a dream about his father:

[W]e was both back in older times and I was on horseback goin through the mountains of a night. Goin through this pass in the mountains. It was cold and there was snow on the ground and he rode past me and kept on goin. Never said nothin ... I seen he was carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn from the light inside of it ... And in the dream I knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that whenever I got there he would be there. (309)

His dream, recalling the wilderness settings of McCarthy's *Border Trilogy*, provides a safe space away from the horrors of the real world. The presence of his father carrying the fire positions Bell into the role of a child. He is to be protected from the darkness that surrounds him by his father who died young<sup>9</sup> and has, therefore, assumed a kind of mythological status. However, despite the dream's ability to offer a psychological space that Bell can retreat to, the final words of the novel, "[a]nd then I woke up" (309), bring him back to a harsher reality.

In an extended conversation with Uncle Ellis, Bell recounts a war story in which he "cut and run" (276) after his team is ambushed by German soldiers. His confession comes after he relinquishes his position as Sheriff, deciding that he "wont push his chips forward and stand up and go out to meet [Chigurh]" (3). This inability to save Moss and Carla Jean, and stop Chigurh's violence, compels Jay Ellis to describe Bell as "a model for god in McCarthy philosophy: a slightly doddering figure old before his time" (245). Bell's failure to incite change causes him to question his relevance in a world that has apparently given in to drug runners and serial killers. He ultimately succumbs to the pessimism of modern secular

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<sup>9</sup> Regarding his father, Bell says "I've been older now than he ever was for almost twenty years so in a sense I'm lookin back at a younger man" (308).

apocalyptic thought in which the world's inevitable and irrevocable collapse cannot be prevented by human intervention. As with *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy employs the mythology of the frontier to conclude the novel with a reiteration of his position that any worthy protagonist will never be in step with the nihilistic present.



### Chapter Three: Renewal without God in *The Road*

“There is no God and we are his prophets.”

(Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* 170)

If *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men* reject the possibility of redemption and worldly renewal after the apocalypse, envisioning instead an entropic collapse into nothingness, then *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic landscape confirms John Grady's fear of the “darkening land, the world to come” (302). Set in the near future, McCarthy's novel follows a man and a boy across a “cauterized terrain” (14) in the “cold and autistic dark” (15) as they make their way towards the coast. Only remnants of the old world, now haunted by tribes of cannibalistic men and women, remain. The landscape is bereft of colour, coated in ash with “days more gray each one than what had gone before” (3) and, as with *Blood Meridian*'s Texas/Mexico border, littered with the dead: “[f]igures half mired in the blacktop, clutching themselves, mouths howling” (190). In fact, Mark Allen Cunningham sees *The Road* as a “thematic bookend to *Blood Meridian*” through its restaging of “nineteenth-century violence [into] a twenty-first-century future” (36). While McCarthy never discloses how the world ended, the mention of “[a] long shear of light and then a series of low concussions” (52) infers nuclear disaster. The phrase ‘long shear of light,’ in particular, recalls *The Crossing*'s<sup>1</sup> final scene in which the protagonist, Bill Parham, witnesses the detonation of a nuclear bomb:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Crossing*, McCarthy's second novel in his Border Trilogy, follows a similar narrative pattern to *All the Pretty Horses* in which naive cowboys experience post-revolution Mexico. As with *Horses*, *The Crossing* eulogises the passing of cowboy life and man's relationship with the natural. Concluding the novel with a nuclear detonation reaffirms the trilogy's apocalyptic concerns about modernity.

He woke in the *white light* of the desert noon and sat up in the ranksmelling blankets. The shadow of the barewood windowash stencilled onto the opposite wall began to pale and fade as he watched. As if a cloud were passing over the sun ... *The road was a pale gray in the light and the light was drawing away along the edges of the world.* (My emphasis 740)

In my previous chapter, I looked at how the consequences of modernity transformed the frontier from an idyllic pastoral locale to a space partitioned by fences and railroad tracks. This transformation fuelled a significant sense of loss in *All the Pretty Horses* and dread in *No Country for Old Men*, as the protagonists of their respective novels waited hopelessly for history to end without renewal. These novels also contributed to a tradition of nineteenth century American fiction that, according to Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, dealt with the literal eruption of the machine into the wilderness. In *The Road* "the machines have grown deadly, even universally deadly, having taken on new shapes in the form of chemical waste, air and water pollution, and of course, nuclear technology and all of its attendant dangers" (Edwards 56).

In the twentieth century, the nuclear bomb perhaps best symbolizes the anxieties around the advancement and proliferation of technology. Its capacity for global annihilation confirmed beliefs that the apocalypse was not to come from the heavens, but humankind's technological hubris. Daniel Wojcik sees "[t]he dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 [as initiating an] era of nuclear apocalypticism that has flourished in American religious culture, folklore, and popular culture [fuelling] both religious and secular speculation about nuclear weapons [and their ability] to bring about the end of the world" (*Embracing Doomsday* 297). Although religious prophets identify correlations between biblical scripture and nuclear warfare, leading "nonbelievers to consider seriously the claims

of Bible prophecy” (Paul Boyer 119),<sup>2</sup> the narrative of the atomic bomb ultimately differs from biblical apocalyptic tropes through its secular nature, obviating the potential for divine intervention and worldly renewal. Klaus R. Scherpe further adds that “[t]he nuclear catastrophe, viewed as ‘pure’ terror, as the fatal consolidation and refinement of all the vital power of labor and knowledge, excludes every metaphysical reflection and paralyzes our fantasy and imagination” (95). Fantasies of renewal after the end of the world are dissolved by the devastating nature of the bomb. It fuelled the belief that the apocalypse was not only impending, but that there would be no “possibility that time may prove redemptive or regenerative” (Zamora, *Writing the Apocalypse* 55).

Interestingly, the bomb’s capacity to completely erase civilisation has also invited a strange, if compelling, attraction to such a scenario. Nuclear holocaust, while devastating, also enacts a kind of tabula rasa across the world, creating a chance to begin anew. Thus, we witness the eradication of a corrupt modern society and the (re)creation of a new world. Mick Broderick, examining a wave of science fiction films that consider nuclear holocaust from this perspective, writes that

[w]hile some films have explored (albeit fleetingly) post-holocaust life as a site for ideological contestation, the cinematic renderings of long-term post-nuclear survival appear highly reactionary, and seemingly advocate reinforcing the symbolic order of the status quo via the maintenance of conservative social regimes of patriarchal law (and lore). In so doing, they articulate a desire for (if not celebrate) the fantasy of nuclear Armageddon as the anticipated war which will annihilate the oppressive burdens of (post)modern life and usher in the nostalgically yearned-for less complex

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<sup>2</sup> See also Andrew Weigert’s article “Christian Eschatological Identities and the Nuclear Context.”

existence of agrarian toil and social harmony through ascetic spiritual endeavors. (362)

This desire for a life free from the burdens of modernity evokes John Grady and Sheriff Bell's retreat into the past. Thus, it would be ironic, in light of the pessimistic attitudes of these protagonists towards modernity, if the nuclear bomb were to trigger a kind of global cleansing. The result would not only be a landscape "shorn of its referents" (*The Road* 81) but also a virgin land ready to begin anew. In this respect, the post-apocalyptic landscape recalls early colonial life across a hostile frontier.

In my final chapter, I will suggest that *The Road* negotiates its way between the nihilistic terror of nuclear holocaust and the hope that renewal will emerge from the impenetrable dark. While the novel's depiction of the world as an "ashen scabland" (15) suggests a continuance of my second chapter's apocalyptic pessimism, McCarthy does not preclude the existence of hope. Although the novel does not propose the beneficence of nuclear holocaust, it does infer that hope and renewal can be wrenched from a world ostensibly hopeless. *The Road* explores this dichotomy through the man and the boy, and this relationship will inform my reading of the novel within an apocalyptic framework that responds to both biblical and secular ideologies.

### ***1. The Road's eschatology***

Perhaps the most significant example of this dialectic between hope and despair is in the novel's final pages. The man, after taking the boy as far as he can, succumbs to the mysterious illness that has afflicted him since the beginning of the novel. Before he dies, he tells his son that "[g]oodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again" (281). Following this, the boy comes across the good guys he has been anticipating their entire

journey south. Although critics are divided on the nature of these saviours, the brief paragraph that follows offers a glimpse into the boy's future interactions with them: "[s]he would sometimes talk to him about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget. The woman said that was all right. She said the breath of God was his breath yet though it pass from man to man through all time" (286). This passage suggests a relatively happy ending, offering no inference these people may be planning to kill or eat the boy. Instead, their arrival almost immediately after the father's death seems to imply an ending that responds to the narrative tropes of biblical apocalypse. The good people represent the beginning of one line of history after the end of another. It is reasonable to suppose that this new family will provide the boy a secular new heaven on earth.

This rescue, however, is immediately followed by a brief coda:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (286 - 287)

The elegiac tenor of this passage seems to throw *The Road* back into the pessimistic apocalyptic territory of *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men*. The 'maps and mazes' which 'could not be put back' and 'not be made right again' suggests a world that has come to the very end of itself, that is unable to regenerate and start anew. The world will

simply die or remain forever an ashen wasteland. Shelly L. Rambo argues that this passage unsettles the seemingly redemptive conclusion of the boy's story when he discovers the good people. She suggests that a redemptive framework cannot satisfy the apocalyptic landscape McCarthy represents in *The Road*: "the redemptive identity and mission provided by the father is forced, highlighting the dissonance between reality and interpretation" (114). Instead, Rambo offers a reading of the novel through the lens of trauma theory, questioning what it means to survive and witness after the end has occurred. Yet instead of rejecting a redemptive framework, as Rambo does, I believe that McCarthy reconciles these ideologically opposed endings through this phrase: "[the boy] tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didnt forget" (286). While the novel appears to reject theodicy, I argue that it offers redemption through a secular framework. The absence of God forces the characters to look elsewhere, and it is through the boy's altruism that this hope is located; hope that offers an opportunity for renewal without divine intervention. The novel combines the tropes of both biblical and secular apocalyptic thought, charting a trajectory towards a new eschatological framework.

However, the boy's goodness must contend with the man's pessimism and reticence to help other survivors they meet on the road. Thus, their divergent viewpoints on how to exist in a post-apocalyptic world correspond with the two different types of apocalyptic thought discussed in this thesis. By drawing this argument, however, I am not implying the man and the boy are ideologically opposed in the same way Judge Holden and the kid are, though there are similarities. Instead, I wish to suggest that the man's pessimism comes from a nihilistic belief that God has abandoned them and there is nothing left to hope for but death. The boy, through his desire to help others, challenges this attitude by carrying the fire of renewal. Hope not only emerges from the boy's altruism, but the man's gradual understanding of his son's importance.

## 2. *Godless Landscapes*

The most compelling evidence that God has abandoned the world is in the novel's depiction of landscape. *The Road* depicts a world characterised by its nothingness: "[the man] got the binoculars out of the cart and stood in the road and glassed the plain down there where the shape of a city stood in the grayness like a charcoal drawing sketched across the waste. Nothing to see" (8). Thomas H. Schaub questions the existence of spirituality in the novel when read within an Emersonian framework that considers nature as a sacred text. For Schaub, "McCarthy's novel poses the question of what access we might have to spirit once those natural signs are obliterated; or if obliteration itself be our last remaining sign – fire, ash, cannibalized remains – what spirit does it symbolise" (155)? In my second chapter, I discussed how the minimalistic representation of landscape in *No Country for Old Men* reinforced the novel's theme of disappearance and of the emptying of romance from the frontier. *The Road* uses a similar narrative strategy, albeit in a much more forceful way. The novel's "[b]arren, silent, godless" (4) world, with days dimming away "[l]ike the onset of some cold glaucoma" (3) seem to confirm that the only signs left are those that reinforce divine absence. This fuels frustration and despair within the man: "[h]e raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? he whispered. Will I see you at last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Have you a heart? Damn you eternally have you a soul? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God" (11 - 12). Other characters who wander the road also share this lack of faith. When the man and boy meet Ely, a blind old wanderer, the man suggests his son is a god. Ely is sceptical, questioning what use a god would be in the world they inhabit:

I'm past all that now. Have been for years. Where men cant live gods fare no better. You'll see. It's better to be alone. So I hope that's not true what you said because to be on the road with the last god would be a terrible

thing so I hope it's not true. Things will be better when everybody's gone.

(172)

For Ely, the world cannot offer the potential to begin anew. It is already dead, rejecting ideas of salvation. He has succumbed to the pessimism that this nightmarish landscape proliferates.

This godless world, additionally, collapses the structures of human society, creating a space that offers no overriding meaning or order. When the man and the boy consult a "tattered oilcompany roadmap that had once been taped together but now ... just sorted into leaves and numbered with crayon in the corners for their assembly" (42), the boy asks what happened to the state roads. "I dont know exactly," the man responds (43). In place of state roads and civil codes is a darkness without "depth or dimension" (67), symbolizing the theological void that threatens to negate the man's purpose for continuing. This void, additionally, invites violence unencumbered by the dictums of society. The cannibals that haunt the road are the most effective demonstration of this: emaciated men and women who, in their wanderings, "neither [speak] nor [call] to each other, the more sinister for that" (67). Their complete relinquishment of morality and compassion both responds to and reinforces the nihilistic wasteland that the man and boy must inhabit. They are the most obvious descendants of the Glanton gang, indulging in incomprehensible depravity such as harvesting human prisoners for food, or eating a newborn baby before leaving it "headless and gutted and blackening on the spit" (198). However, their violence is not committed in celebration of the sanctity of war, but for their survival. They scour the landscape for human flesh in order to maintain "their own essentially futile existences at the expense of the weak and vulnerable" (Gallivan 98). Thus, their will to survive serves as an unsettlingly dark reflection of the man and his mission to protect his son. "I was appointed to do that by God," he tells the boy. "I will kill anyone who touches you" (77). The boy is concerned about his father's



firm resolve. After they escape a basement full of human prisoners, he says “[w]e wouldn’t ever eat anybody, would we ... Even if we were starving” (128)?

In the only face-to-face confrontation with a cannibal, McCarthy offers a detailed description:

Eyes collared in cups of grime and deeply sunk. Like an animal inside a skull looking out the eyeholes. He wore a beard that had been cut square across the bottom with shears and he had a tattoo of a bird on his neck done by someone with an illformed notion of their appearance. He was lean, wiry, rachitic. Dressed in a pair of filthy blue coveralls and a blank billcap with the logo of some vanished enterprise embroidered across the front of it. (63)

The cannibal’s appearance not only signifies his savagery, but it also bears the signs that remind us of a lost time. His tattoo on his neck and the logo on his billcap refer to a world that no longer exists. In a novel concerned with signs and their referents, these particular details serve to reinforce the vanishing of natural and human artefacts. The ‘illformed’ tattoo of the bird, in particular, serves as a grim reminder of the absence of all animals in the novel. McCarthy pays tribute to their extinction when the man, “[o]nce in those early years ... wakened in a barren wood and lay listening to the flocks of migratory birds ... Their half muted crankings miles above where they circled the earth ... He wished them godspeed till they were gone. He never heard them again” (53).

The absence of natural signs in *The Road*’s landscape also, ironically, reverses the anxieties about space that were discussed in my second chapter. While the characters of *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men* found themselves confined in smaller and smaller

spaces, the man and the boy face the dangers of the open road. Chris Walsh observes that *The Road*'s representation of landscape, which "[goes] from a distant, settled sense of place to a new mythically terrifying sense of space" (49), succeeds

in reviving the most cherished geocentric American myth of the frontier, of a new physical, imaginative and spatial beginning. In what is a major symbolic gesture McCarthy re-inscribes this national myth; in so doing, he reverses the westerly spatial movement of his own characters, and we leave the boy as he continues to carry his light into the South. (54)

The man and boy's daily struggle for survival in a hostile and barren world certainly evokes early frontier narratives. Colonials were compelled to navigate the frontier due to a belief they had been divinely elected to establish a new kingdom on earth. For David Mogen, the Puritans saw "the New World [as] their Promised land ... a wilderness where they would be severely tried, a land of darkness threatening to extinguish the precarious light of Christianity" (94). The man and boy are seemingly under a similar divine mission in their assurance they are "carrying the fire" (83). However, McCarthy remains coy on what they actually mean by that phrase. Thus, its metaphorical and intangible nature potentially undermines whatever hope it purports to offer. This speaks to the novel's dialectic between the optimism that renewal is coming and the pessimism of eternal, mindless wandering across a nuclear wasteland.

### **3. *The Man***

Perhaps the most obvious way *The Road* articulates the pessimism of secular apocalypse is through the man's mourning of the past. Throughout the novel, the man offers memories of life before or immediately after the nuclear bomb destroyed the world. These recollections,

whether taking up a paragraph or several pages, are often, though not always, situated in pastoral settings. Early in the novel, the man remembers “a lake a mile from his uncle’s farm ... The shore was lined with birchtrees that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond. The edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered ... *This was the perfect day of his childhood. The day to shape the days upon*” (my emphasis 12 - 13).

Additional memories or dreams, including one of his wife emerging from “a green and leafy canopy” (18), and another where he remembers watching “the flash of trout deep in a pool” (41), reinforce this connection between the pastoral and the past. In a similar way to Sheriff Bell, the man’s remembrance of the past informs his lack of hope about the future. Although he prioritises the survival of himself and his son, his true feelings on living in the post-apocalyptic world are ambiguous. When they discover a bunker stocked with canned food, some part of him “wished they’d never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over” (154). For the man these brief reprieves from starvation only extend a miserable dystopian existence. The boy asks him what is the bravest thing he has ever done, and the man responds, somewhat sardonically, “[g]etting up this morning” (272). It is clear that the only reason he is still alive is because of his son.

Representation of life before the apocalypse is primarily through the man’s consciousness. This is significant since McCarthy generally keeps the interior lives of his protagonists closed to the reader. Inner selves are usually symbolically revealed through landscape, or action. Even Sheriff Bell only articulates his anxieties through the distancing act of speech.<sup>3</sup> The man however, offers his thought processes in often-immediate stream-of-

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<sup>3</sup> In one monologue Bell briefly brings up his dead daughter, before immediately saying “I wont talk about that” (90). This reaffirms his control over the narrative.

consciousness passages.<sup>4</sup> Such is the case when he contemplates killing his son to save him from being eaten by cannibals:

Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesn't fire? It has to fire. What if it doesn't fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly. (114)

This intimate look into the man's psyche allows an exploration of the role, and fragility, of memory in the novel. The obliteration of the old world leaves the man's recollections as the only referents to the past. Without these memories, or the memories of other survivors, time before the bomb would cease to exist. While there remain landmarks, buildings, and other structures in the post-apocalyptic world, they have been irrevocably tainted by either ash, or corpses, warping their connotations to something more hopeless or malevolent. Houses, for example, are no longer havens but hideouts for thieves or cannibals. They are places of danger. Thus, only memories can effectively represent the world that was.

Yet, the intangibility of memory reveals its finiteness and fragility. With each passing day, the man's knowledge of the past is eroded by a nightmarish present. He is aware that "each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins" (131). Richard Klein determines that "total nuclear war ... is, potentially, a burning of practically everything, including memory" (80) and, therefore, "the [complete] destruction ... of the institutions of collective

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<sup>4</sup> McCarthy's early southern fiction, and *Blood Meridian*, have been noted and celebrated for their objective representation of violence. The murder of a baby in *Outer Dark* or the necrophilia in *Child of God* is as matter of fact as the author's depiction of landscape. From *All the Pretty Horses* however, violence takes on a more explicit moral weight. John Grady feels disillusionment and guilt after failing to save Blevins and killing the man in prison. Sheriff Bell retreats because of his incomprehension of the violent world around him. In *The Road* violence becomes even more devastating due to McCarthy's use of stream of consciousness. It is immediate, and disturbing, and disruptive.

memory [makes] absolutely vulnerable in the nuclear age ... the institution of literature” (82). That is not to suggest, Klein argues, humanity becomes less of a priority. However, the possibility that humanity will survive total nuclear war is more likely than the survival of the archives of literature. In many ways, *The Road* is a representation of humanity stripped of the trappings of culture, civilisation and memory, questioning who we are without the advancements of the past. McCarthy addresses this anxiety through the man’s gradual loss of memory of life before the apocalypse. Tim Edwards argues that “the man [operates as] a sort of anti-Adam, who literally sees his world being uncreated before his eyes” (59). The constant reminder of obliteration, as the man and boy move towards the coast, reinforces the irrecoverable past and the bleakness of the future. This is evident when

[h]e dreamt of walking in a flowering wood where birds flew before them  
he and the child and the sky was aching blue but he was learning how to  
wake himself from just siren worlds. Lying there in the dark with the  
uncanny taste of peace from some phantom orchard fading in his mouth. He  
thought if he lived long enough the world at last would be all lost. Like the  
dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory.  
(18)

For the man, the gradual dissolution of his recollections takes him one-step closer to nothingness, to becoming like the cannibals who live only to eat. It is perhaps telling that the man comes from a background of culture and intellectualism. This significantly contrasts with the kid, John Grady and Moss whose abilities lay in their relationship with the wilderness. Although the man also demonstrates keen survival skills, his background allows him to articulate, philosophically, the struggle against nothingness, the intangibility of memory and his theological crisis.

In an effort to halt this gradual erasure of memory, the man attempts to re-enact daily rituals and tasks from the old world. When preparing breakfast the man “came ... with their plates and some cornmeal cakes in a plastic bag and a plastic bottle of syrup. He spread the small tarp they used for a table on the ground and laid everything out” (5). Ronald S. Wilhelm sees this as “a highly significant gesture on the father’s part, for despite their condition as scavengers in a seemingly cataclysmic world, he performs the centuries-old ritual of preparing the meal as a sign of civilized humanity” (132). When the man and the boy discover the bunker full of food, he teaches his son traditions of the past such as putting “butter on your biscuits” (145). This may seem frivolous, but it ultimately goes towards constructing a sense of order that has otherwise been obliterated. These rituals however are constantly undermined or destabilised by the reality of the world around them.

Furthermore, the spectre of his wife, who is already dead when the novel begins, haunts the man throughout their journey south. Flashbacks explain she chose to kill herself “with a flake of obsidian ... [s]harper than steel” (58) instead of enduring a nightmarish landscape populated with people who want to “rape us and kill us and eat us” (56). McCarthy does not dismiss the likelihood of this scenario, as the man and the boy are in constant danger of being raped and eaten. Thus, she speaks from a position of rationality, albeit cold and unsympathetic rationality. In a largely one-sided conversation between the man and his wife, she justifies, “with the earnestness of philosophers chained to a madhouse wall” (58), her case for self-destruction:

You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none. Maybe you’ll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well

advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breathe it into being and  
coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it  
from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is for eternal  
nothingness and I hope it with all my heart. (57)

McCarthy is usually celebrated for his dialogue, as demonstrated in the Border Trilogy's representation of cowboy voice. Even Holden's long lectures in *Blood Meridian* attain a poetic and Shakespearian quality, distracting us, and the scalp hunters, from his horrific worldview. It is surprising then, that the wife's dialogue lacks a certain authenticity as she justifies her nihilistic embrace of death. There is a decided lack of naturalism in her dialogue, the naturalism that McCarthy captures so convincingly in his other western novels. Although the wife seems to descend from a tradition of philosophers in McCarthy's fiction that articulate the violent reality of history, her words fail to paint her in a realistic or sympathetic light. While some critics such as Patrick W. Shaw and Barclay Owens suggest that McCarthy's depiction of women is less successful than his other achievements, I believe that his jarring and inauthentic characterisation of the wife is intentional. She voices the coldness of rationality, putting forward an overly intellectual hypothesis on why suicide is ultimately the best course of action. Thus, her mechanical dialogue serves to contrast the humanity in the comparatively simple exchanges between the man and the boy:

They're going to kill those people, arent they?

Yes.

Why do they have to do that?

I dont know.

Are they going to eat them?

I dont know.

They're going to eat them, arent they?

Yes.

And we couldnt help them because then they'd eat us too.

Yes. (127)

When the wife refers to herself as a “faithless slut” with a “whorish heart” (57), her infidelity becomes a refusal to understand the world and better relate to it like her son does. The simplicity of the man and boy’s conversations reverberate more convincingly and with greater truth than the wife’s philosophical justifications.

McCarthy’s depiction of the wife as cold and emotionless recalls John Grady’s mother, and her disregard of his needs. Like Mrs. Grady, she chooses a divergent path from her husband and son without considering how it will affect them. It is interesting, in a novel celebrated for its depiction of enduring love, that the wife rejects notions of compassion and hope. Instead, she takes death as “a new lover” for “[h]e can give [her] what [the man] cannot” (57). She only sees futility in hope, dismissive of its usefulness in a world that ostensibly has no space for it. We also see in the exchange between the wife and the man a continuance of the rationality versus idealism debate that informed much of John Grady’s tragic journey in *All the Pretty Horses*. The wife comes across as a descendant of the Dueña Alfonsa, asserting that a history of bloodshed conspires against them. Yet, she arguably deviates from Alfonsa’s puppet show through the autonomous act of suicide. Rather than face what history has planned for her, she “dictates the terms of her own fate” (*Blood Meridian* 199) by removing herself from the world. This assertion of free will, however, is ultimately an embrace of nihilism and a rejection of renewal. Wilhelm suggests that “McCarthy seems to



drive the point home here. It represents that [the wife's] philosophy is untenable, even immoral in the face of human suffering, whether there is a God or not" (135). Her abandonment leaves the burden of their son on the shoulders of the man, who, despite his protestations, would have probably also chosen suicide if not for his parental duty.

Her choice haunts the man throughout the novel, and when he gets into arguments with his son he takes the role of rationality once assumed by his wife. These arguments usually involve the boy's call for altruism, but also other instances such as when the man wishes to explore an abandoned building, or sleep overnight in a stranger's house. The man's insistence on doing anything to stay alive blurs boundaries between the 'good guys' and 'the bad guys,' disrupting his son's own sense of identity and purpose. This is most evident when a thief attempts to take off with the man and boy's belongings. When the man tracks down the thief he orders him to "take [his] clothes off ... [e]very goddamned stitch" (256) out of revenge. The boy protests, but the man justifies himself by claiming "[h]e didnt mind doing it to us" (257). This act of violence differs from his killing of the cannibal earlier in the novel. While that was committed in self-defence, stripping the thief of his clothes borders on malevolent and the boy comes to fear for both the thief's well being and his father's moral nature.

#### ***4. The Boy***

If the man is still tethered to the past, then the boy, born several days after the apocalypse, represents the future. Knowing nothing of the old world save stories "of courage and justice" (41) his father tells him, the boy navigates the post-apocalyptic landscape without the ruthless self-preservation of the man. Instead, he harbours an altruistic impulse towards people they meet on the road. His desire to help others clashes with the man's distrust of strangers and

determination to survive at all costs. However, despite this tension between the two, the man eventually comes to think of his son as a god or imbued by some divine power. For the man, if the boy “is not the word of God God never spoke” (5). Critical interpretations have similarly assigned the boy a divine role. Susan J. Tyburski, using a phrase from McCarthy’s play *The Sunset Limited*,<sup>5</sup> argues that the boy has the “lingering scent of divinity” and “[serves] as the moral and spiritual touchstone [of the novel]” (125). Additionally, Ashley Kunsu asserts that “[t]he boy serves as an Adamic figure, a messiah not unlike Christ himself” (65).

The boy’s saintly capacity to empathise with strangers also indicates a belief in the persistence of hope in a devastated world. However, my own view that *The Road* offers secular renewal or redemption, necessarily makes the boy something other than God. This is best understood by elucidating the phrase “carrying the fire” (83). Throughout the novel, the boy asks his father if they are still carrying the fire. McCarthy never reveals what they mean by this, though it is reasonable to infer that the fire represents a drive to never give up. Indeed the man tells the boy: “[t]his is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They dont give up” (137). Jay Ellis speculates “[t]he fire might be merely attempts at decency” (30), while Shelly L. Rambo interprets the phrase as a mission or task: “[t]hrough this statement, the father has given their journey purpose. The implication is that someone is waiting to receive the fire that they bear” (104). The phrase also recalls the closing monologue of *No Country for Old Men*, in which Sheriff Bell recounts a dream about his father

carryin fire in a horn the way people used to do and I could see the horn  
from the light inside of it. About the color of the moon. And in the dream I  
knew that he was goin on ahead and that he was fixin to make a fire

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<sup>5</sup> *The Sunset Limited* is a play by Cormac McCarthy, published in 2006. It takes place in a single setting, with two characters – named ‘Black’ and ‘White’ – debating the existence of God. This debate

somewhere out there in all that dark and all that cold and I knew that  
whenever I got there he would be there. And then I woke up. (309)

The details of this dream suggest McCarthy might have already been thinking of *The Road* when writing Bell's monologue. Certainly, in this short paragraph he provides a father/son relationship in, what could be taken as a succinct description of *The Road's* landscape, 'all that dark and all that cold,' and fire in a horn to presumably ward off this encroaching darkness. In my second chapter, I read this dream as Bell's final retreat from the real world. It reveals his longing for a wilderness past, a longing reinforced by the presence of his father who, like John Grady's grandfather, represents an older and nobler time. From this monologue, *The Road* seems to adopt the significance of the fire.

Although the man does not seem to make much of the phrase, other than as a means to comfort his son, the boy's constant emphasis that they are carrying the fire suggests he is trying to discover meaning in their seemingly endless movement. Throughout the novel, conversations between the man and the boy usually involve the boy's attempts at understanding their purpose in the world. He refers to his father and himself as the 'good guys,' and the cannibals as the 'bad guys.' These designated labels serve to retain some semblance of moral order in the post-apocalypse wasteland, even if it is only for the boy's benefit. Yet, for the boy, just refraining from eating people is not enough to be a 'good guy.' He considers this title as an imperative to offer help to those in need, such as a man "struck by lightning" (50), or a lost boy (84), or a thief who stole from them (259). However, his father's reticence to help others forces the boy to re-evaluate their assigned identities. After the man kills a cannibal in self-defence the boy needs to know, "[a]re we still the good guys?"

Yes. We're still the good guys.

And we always will be.

Yes. We always will be.

Okay. (77)

The boy's repetition of the word okay in their conversations suggests a constant need for reassurance. However, as the novel progresses and the boy's distinctions between right and wrong begin to blur, these conversations with his father fail to appease him. This is seen in instances when the boy will not, or cannot, speak. Usually they are a reaction against some transgression committed by his father such as when he refuses to help the man struck by lightning, or when he shoots and kills the cannibal. In a similar way to the kid, the boy's silence serves as a form of protest; he is upset that the man is unable or unwilling to offer help. When the father reprimands the boy for his protests saying "[y]ou're not the one who has to worry about everything," the boy, tearfully, responds "[y]es I am ... I am the one" (259). This assertion of his responsibility to 'worry about everything' seems to elevate his status in the novel. Ashley Kunsu argues that "[t]his moment shines not simply for its transparency, but also for its singularity and the change it suggests: here, the boy unequivocally states who he is, whereas previously he has looked to his father for answers, asking whether they are the good guys" (66).

The boy's individuation and diminishing reliance on his father's advice or direction is significant in the context of biblical apocalyptic thought with its rejection of the past in favour of the new. Disappointed by the man's refusal to assist people, the boy comes to disbelieve stories of "courage and justice" (41). When the man asks him if he wants to hear a story, the boy turns him down by saying "those stories are not true" (268). When he is asked what happened to the flute that the man made for him, the boy says he "threw it away" (159). The boy, then, represents the future. His actions in the novel indicate the way to move forward, and away from the pessimistic sphere that his father inhabits. As always, this is evident in the

way McCarthy depicts landscape. I have already noted that *The Road* appears to reverse anxieties about space felt in *All the Pretty Horses* and *No Country for Old Men*. Instead of the claustrophobia of fences, motel rooms, and hospitals, dread in *The Road* comes from the open, enveloping, and seemingly limitless dark that the man and boy traverse through.

This reversal of space in *The Road* however has not dissolved the threat of enclosed places. Most of the houses the man and boy explore are abandoned, providing ample locations to scavenge for food and supplies. Interestingly, the boy expresses anxiety whenever his father is about to enter a house. He claims, “[t]here could be somebody here” (25) waiting to attack them. When they stay in an abandoned house for a few nights, the boy refuses to go upstairs and investigate believing the occupants might be up there “scared [or] dead” (210). This fear of small spaces is unsurprising since the boy has probably spent most of his life on the road. He is more inured to open space despite being more exposed and open to surprise attacks. The boy’s anxiety also stems from his relation to the past. Because nuclear disaster has wiped out most of human civilization, and sent the rest to wandering, houses do not signify warmth or safety anymore. When the man discovers his childhood home he is overwhelmed with nostalgia, which he tries to relate to his son:

This is where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy. He turned and looked out at the waste of the yard. A tangle of dead lilac. The shape of a hedge. On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here, me and my sisters, doing our homework. The boy watched him. Watched shapes claiming him he could not see. We should go, Papa, he said. Yes, the man said. But he didnt. (26)

Having not experienced this himself, the boy cannot connect with the man’s reminiscence and sees the house instead as a danger. The house is a vestige of the past, no longer able to offer

the same connotations or consolations it once did. The boy's insistence that they 'should go' also elucidates the static nature of homes, and how such stasis threatens the protagonists' need to keep moving onward. Instead of continuing down the road, the man wants to stay and live in the memory of the past that the house holds for him. But to do so would inevitably get them killed. The boy's fear of small spaces is affirmed when he follows his father into a basement

down the rough wooden steps. [The man] ducked his head and then flicked the lighter and swung the flame out over the darkness like an offering.

Coldness and damp. An ungodly stench. The boy clutched at his coat. He could see part of a stone wall. Clay floor. An old mattress darkly stained ...

Huddled against the back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, sheltering their faces with their hands. (110)

These people are livestock for the cannibals, helplessly waiting to be eaten. Their imprisonment replicates the terrifying claustrophobia of enclosed spaces that lead to Moss's death in a motel room, and send Sheriff Bell retreating into a wilderness dream. Yet, McCarthy's depiction of the danger of small spaces is subverted when the man and boy discover an underground bunker stocked with canned food, beds and blankets. This discovery offers a brief reprieve from the dangers that constantly pursue them, allowing an opportunity to return to the era before the devastation and perform domestic roles violently wrenched from them by nuclear holocaust. However, their new home can only be temporary. Both the man and the boy understand that they have to keep moving to avoid discovery and find some enduring means of survival.

For the boy, his father's past is unable to satisfy his vision of how the world should be. It has proven to be false and so he must seek for something new. This rejection of the old world,

represented by his father, echoes the kid's arc in *Blood Meridian*. Both characters chart a trajectory of their own by offering compassion to those in need, and these acts of altruism frustrate their respective father figures. However, unlike the Judge, the man eventually comes to recognize the boy as "the best guy" (279).

While the kid is significantly more violent and anarchic than the boy, his "clemency for the heathen" (299) places him within the same apocalyptic role of offering renewal. Kunsä suggests that the boy's newness identifies him as an Adamic figure<sup>6</sup> who demonstrates his potential by naming – himself and his father – in a world that has otherwise relinquished names. For Kunsä, this "[suggests] that he can go forward, beyond the novel's end, to write the new story of the new world" (67). Thus, the phrase 'carrying the fire' is the fire of creation, of renewal. Before the man dies, he tells his son that the fire is "inside you. It was always there. I can see it" (279). When the boy asks the new people if they are carrying the fire, their response, "[y]ou're kind of weirded out, aren't you" (283), suggests the boy's uniqueness and infers his singular duty to continue the flame of hope.

## **5. Conclusion**

Although *The Road* ends with an elegy to the natural world, implying that the nuclear blast has nullified the potential for hope or renewal, the relationship between father and son ultimately provides a framework in which a new kind of redemption can be sought. The man, holding a greater connection to the past, is pessimistic about not only their chances for survival, but also the meaning, or lack of meaning, in their wandering. While they have the coast as a destination, and the phrase "carrying the fire" (83) as an imperative to never give

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<sup>6</sup> See R.W.B. Lewis's *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* for an exploration of the American figure bereft of a historic past, negotiating the world as a new man.

up, the man cannot fathom life in such a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The deterioration of his memories exacerbates this overwhelming sense of hopelessness. It is the boy, however, who offers meaning and the answer to how we should navigate this new world. His altruism, while ostensibly naive, infers that both hope and goodness survived the nuclear holocaust. His father's inability to comprehend the sanctity of his son's compassion necessitates his death at the end, allowing the boy to discover the good people. Although this may seem slightly cynical a reading, the death of the father, or the past, and the arrival of the saviours, corresponds with the narrative strategies of biblical apocalypse. The world is devastated by a cataclysmic event, only to be saved by the arrival of God.

The novel's hopeful conclusion, and its representation of the landscape, provides compelling evidence that the line of history running through all four of McCarthy's novels studied in this thesis is ultimately circular. *The Road* seems to recall *Blood Meridian's* offering of hope in an anarchic and death strewn landscape. The kid's resistance to Judge Holden's ideology of violence demonstrates this. In a similar way to the boy, the kid's newness, and moral development, offers a reprieve from the novel's uncompromising savageness and responds to biblical apocalyptic narratives in which the arrival of the divine delivers a corrupt and unjust world from evil. Although the Judge kills the kid in an outhouse at the novel's close, the epilogue that follows suggests another figure rising to challenge the darkness. Thus, while *Blood Meridian* concerns itself with death, chaos and violence, its apparent nihilism is undermined by the promise of apocalyptic transformation. Yet, *The Road's* lack of any divine figure implies that this post-apocalyptic world is denied the kind of transformation offered in a biblical apocalypse. Although critics assign the boy a godly role, he does not offer the same renewal the kid and the enigmatic man in the epilogue do. The phrase 'carrying the fire,' while implying some kind of divine mission, is only metaphorical. Despite joining the good people, life will still offer similar horrors to those the man and boy



faced when they were together. Thus, in this regard *The Road* draws from the pessimistic attitude that God has abandoned the world and the approaching end will not entail redemption or renewal.

In my second chapter, I suggest that the hope intrinsic in biblical apocalyptic thought is gone. Instead, modern eschatology bleakly envisions a future bereft of any kind of salvation. This is primarily a response to the proliferation of modernity, and the awareness of our capacity for self-destruction as witnessed in two devastating world wars and the production of weapons of total destruction. This attitude also influences the shifting perceptions of the frontier. What was once seen as a large expanse of limitless land, inspiring the mission of Manifest Destiny, is now closed. The romanticism of westward movement gives way to the bleak reality things must end. In *All the Pretty Horses*, McCarthy revisits the western setting one hundred years after *Blood Meridian*. The protagonist, John Grady Cole, attempts to retain a cowboy lifestyle against a rapidly modernizing world. However, the forces of history constrain his movement into the past and he is made to confront the reality that any possibility of living outside the modern world is illusory. Leo Marx's theory of the interrupted idyll articulates the anxiety over the degeneration of the natural west due to the introduction of barbed wire fences and the railway. This realization leads to disillusionment, and pessimism towards whatever the future will bring.

*No Country for Old Men* continues this pessimism, yet it contains none of the romantic mythology inherent in the American west. Instead, the frontier is a harsh arid desert, a site for drug deals and shootouts. Sheriff Bell laments the disappearance of old world values in the face of a rising tide of darkness, exemplified by the novel's villain Anton Chigurh. Like *All the Pretty Horses*, there is no hope of a better and more prosperous future. *No Country for Old Men* ends with Bell relaying a dream about his father in the dark wilderness, away from the malevolence of the modern world. The mythological resonances in this dream

recall McCarthy's Border Trilogy, particularly with its lone cowboys on horseback making a fire in the night. Bell's final words, "[a]nd then I woke up" (309), however, reinforces the reality that such retreats are impossible.

Thus, *The Road*'s negotiation between nihilism and hope ultimately reconciles the larger apocalyptic threads running through this thesis. If God has indeed abandoned the world by the time John Grady takes his horse into Mexico, then McCarthy provides a new avenue to circumvent the path to total nihilism. *The Road* takes place in a landscape bereft of theological value and replaced with monstrous violence and an encroaching, incomprehensible darkness. From this "terra damnata" (*Blood Meridian* 61), however, emerges the boy. His capacity to articulate human goodness is profoundly significant when everybody else seems to have abandoned such notions. Through this novel, McCarthy challenges assertions about the supposed nihilism of his body of work. Although the author may see a lack of God in the post-apocalyptic future, he does not preclude that hope can still be wrenched from "all that dark and all that cold" (*No Country for Old Men* 309)

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